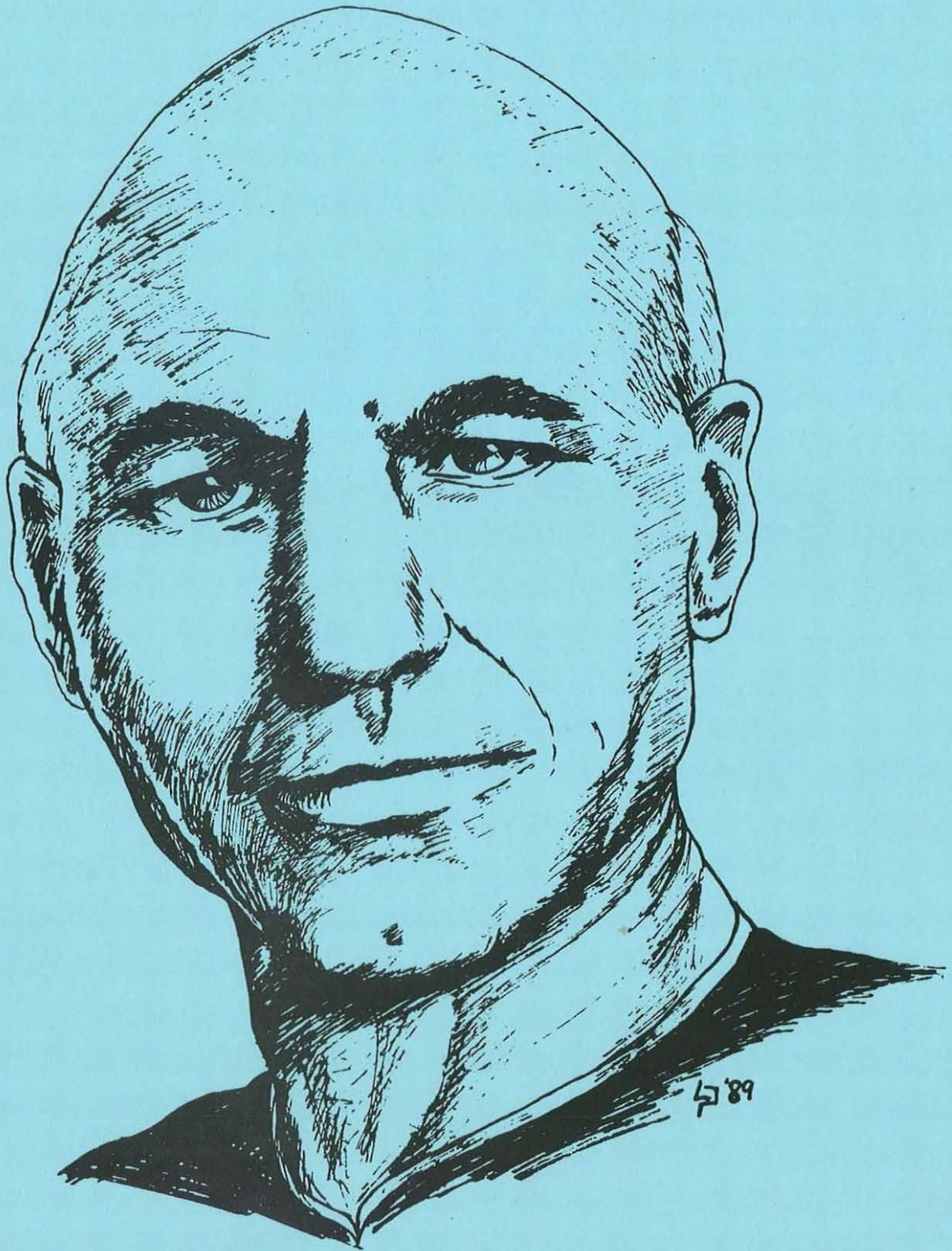


Scotpress

MAKE IT SO 4



Star Trek —
The Next Generation

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ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona

Hello, and welcome to this fourth issue of Make It So.

The question of what makes us assign a story to Make It So has arisen again, and here seems as good a place as any to detail our criteria.

A story must have in it one or more characters who appeared in TNG - these could be either the main crew or guest characters; or in the case of a cross-series story involving the crew of the original Enterprise, be set in TNG's time using TNG's technology. The story in the last issue using an elderly Admiral McCoy and the holodeck, for example, had to go in Make It So because that technology didn't exist on the original Enterprise (and of course McCoy is a TNG guest character). A story could be about a character of the writer's invention who has been assigned to NCC-1701-D, as long as that character is interacting with the regular crew... and as long as the dreaded Lt. Mary Sue doesn't show up! (Who is Mary Sue? A female crewmember who is young, beautiful, so sweet-natured she is loved by everyone and so brilliant she can take over any position on the ship, including that of Captain, as efficiently as the regular incumbent - and at some point usually does. Oh, yes - she is also passionately in love with whoever the writer's favourite character happens to be.)

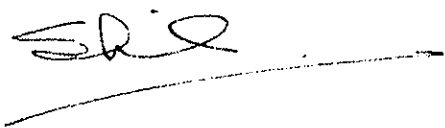
We don't want stories involving the death of any of the main characters (apart from Yar, for obvious reasons) and we're not interested in stories dealing with explicit sex.

We realise that some of you would prefer all the stories to be about the main crew and their interaction with each other, but we would ask those readers to remember that we also have to cater for other readers who prefer a wider range of stories or who have a fondness for one or more of the guest characters. In addition, we can only print what we get! (In other words, to get exactly the sort of story you like to read... you have to write it!)

We have one or two new names appearing in this issue as well as a number of well-known ones. Ann Peters is a new poet submitting to us for the first time. Christine Jones has been submitting material for IDIC LOG but this is her first appearance in Make It So. Mary S Lee is another new writer whose excellent story will not, I hope, be her last! We have some story submissions from Lori Scott that are being typed up as well as her poem in this issue. Lorraine Goodison has been a prolific writer in these first four issues, and I still have one story of hers on file. On the other hand we could do with more (hint, hint)... I also have two being typed up that have been written by Lorraine's new husband - yes, since the last issue of Make It So went out, Lorraine has married, and we wish her all the best. Scott Carrick's name is also well known to readers of Make It So, and his current story is a very imaginative one; and although Sandy Catchick is best known for her Original Trek stories, she has turned her talents towards TNG more than once.

All our covers so far have been by Lorraine - I wish I could draw like that! Anita Shearman is a new artist to our ranks, and Nola Frame-Grey has come up with some more of her inimitable cartoons.

As always, we are on the lookout for submissions. I think all our new writers will agree that we don't bite, and if we think a story or poem needs to be developed further, we bark very quietly!



LOVE IS...

by

Lorraine Goodison

There are times when, even on the USS Enterprise, boredom rears its head. Case in point; a late shift on the bridge, where nothing had happened for three hours and nothing was likely to happen for the next three, and Acting Ensign Crusher was showing signs of regretting his recent promotion. It had seemed wonderful at the time, but no-one had mentioned the extra work or the long hours on duty. That was not entirely true - he dimly remembered Captain Picard indicating the extra workload, but at the time it hadn't seemed important. Wesley heaved a massive yawn and looked around with deep embarrassment.

The senior officer on duty did not notice; his attention was on the screen before him. For most of the shift, Lt. Commander Data had been sitting in front of science station two, running through a private project of his own. At the moment of Wesley's yawn, his attention was focused on the data scrolling up, and it remained thus focused even when Wesley wandered up to the upper level.

"Um... Data, can I ask what you're doing?"

"I am pursuing my current research project, Wesley."

"Oh." The youth peered at the screen but the information was scrolling too fast for him to read. "What is it - advance warp formulas?"

"No. Love."

Another fondly-held belief went out the window as Wesley realised even Data did not always spend his time contemplating the deeper meaning of the universe. All he needed to find out now was that Captain Picard and Commander Riker played backgammon when they had a meeting in the ready room.

"Oh. That's... interesting."

"It is indeed. I am endeavouring to find out why so much Human literature and art is based around such a transitory concept. Computer, hold please." Data moved his gaze from the screen to Wesley's confused features. "Did you know that it is still undecided as to whom William Shakespeare addressed the majority of his sonnets, yet they are widely acclaimed as the most perfect expressions of love and its many aspects."

Wesley blinked and frowned slightly. "Should you be doing this in duty hours?" he asked, vaguely hoping he might be able to do something similar. "I mean, I didn't think Captain Picard allowed that sort of thing unless it was related to a duty task."

Data half smiled, inclining his head slightly. "You forget that I do not sleep. Therefore, I make the best use of my time in research and evaluation. Should anything out of the ordinary occur,

I will be aware of it and able to leave my project at once."

Wesley nodded slowly, wondering if he could ever use that excuse. Sometimes there were distinct advantages in being an android. "Do you ever get bored?"

"Never," Data answered unequivocally. "There is so much to investigate."

"Somehow I thought you'd say that," murmured Wesley as he returned to his duty station.

Data resumed his reading, frowning slightly as he scanned the information. The project was more complex than he had first anticipated. At first he had thought it a simple matter of reading relevant materials, correlating recurring themes and reaching a conclusion, but 'love' was proving difficult to define.

There were so many varieties of love - puppy love, child love, family, friends, spouse, not to mention romantic, platonic, infatuation and unrequited love. The list also included the emotions and actions attributed to love and its effects on the Human equilibrium. The more Data read, the more confused he became. Perhaps he should leave the textbooks and pursue a different line of investigation.

When his duty shift ended, Data searched out Counselor Troi as his first interviewee. The Betazoid woman was slightly taken aback by his question, but she answered him seriously.

"Data, I'm not sure I can tell you what love is. It's not something you can describe."

"Oh." Data looked slightly disappointed. "I had hoped you could give me a clue, at least."

Troi smiled, shaking her head in silent wonder. "I'll try. Love is... what happens between a man and a woman, or friends of either sex, or family members. It is a sort of... deep attachment which bonds them together and which can last for a lifetime and beyond."

"Ah, like the bonding rituals of many life forms - Vulcans, for example."

"Not quite," Troi countered. "Although love can grow from bonding or arranged marriages. Love is more of an emotional bond which can be learned, or is there from the beginning of a relationship. It can be destroyed because of incompatibility between the people involved." She paused, laughing lightly. "Listen to me - trying to define something undefinable."

"That is the purpose of my research, Counselor," Data told her eagerly. "Please continue."

"Data, I don't think you know what you're asking! Love is such an intangible, and it differs according to experience and expectation and upbringing. What a young person calls love, for example, is quite different from an older person's experienced approach."

Data pursed his thin lips. "It is a diverse subject area," he admitted. "I have read widely but now I need some practical input."

Counselor, have you ever experienced love?"

An enigmatic smile crossed Troi's face. "Oh yes... "

"Good. Perhaps you can give me some details."

The Counselor smothered a giggle and tried to look serious and professional. "I met a young officer... " she began.

A short while later, Data found himself a little enlightened but also more uncertain. Deanna Troi's experience of love did reflect some of the facts he possessed, but it also differed. He could not quite understand how she and her lover could decide to part, yet still care for each other. Surely when such a parting caused pain, the love was similarly affected? How, then, could she look upon the person and still feel that love? It was most perplexing.

Data paused, scanning his findings so far. As he pondered his next move, Captain Picard strode round the curve of the corridor. Data seized the opportunity. *No time like the present*, as Geordi would say.

"Captain, do you have knowledge of love?"

The unexpected question caught Picard off guard. Data's questions often had that effect on him. He turned a curious look on his Second Officer.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I am researching love," Data explained, "and I would welcome your views on the subject."

"Oh, is that all... " murmured Picard. He walked across to the android, considering the request. "Well, ah... Love is a broad subject, Data. Could you narrow it down a little?"

"I am having great difficulty in doing so, sir. However, I would like to know why two people who love each other can willingly part, even though it causes them emotional pain."

"Hmm. Well, now... that depends on the situation. In some cases, the love a couple have is not enough to survive their differences. Sometimes there is no choice - they have to part to survive as whole persons."

"That must be very difficult."

"Oh, it is," Picard replied. "But it is also true that a test of love is the ability to let go, so the other person can become fulfilled."

"It seems that love is more complex than I first imagined," Data remarked with some dismay.

Picard smiled. "You're only discovering what Humans have bewailed for centuries, Mr. Data. Now - I'd enjoy discussing this further, but I do have some urgent work to attend to." As he departed, his final words carried to Data's ears. "Let me know how your research goes; I'd be interested to hear the results."

"Certainly, sir."

Data directed his feet towards his next port of call. It seemed strange that Humans themselves were unsure about a definition for something which took up such an inordinate portion of their lives. Perhaps a medical viewpoint would cast some light.

Dr. Crusher was clearly busy when Data entered sickbay, but she paused in her task when the android requested her help. Her answer, however, was not what he had hoped.

"Love is pain," Crusher answered briskly, her memory casting back to sorrow-filled emotions. "Love is hurt and anger, joy and pride, sorrow and despair."

Data blinked, staring at her in astonishment. "But I thought -"

"You thought it was all laughter and roses, right?" Crusher interrupted, brushing past him to retrieve a report from the shelf. "Well, it can be, but I think you should know that love carries a price that no-one thinks about until it's too late."

"I see," said Data, who didn't. "Then you did not love your husband?"

From the look on Beverly Crusher's face, Data understood that he'd dropped yet another social brick. As Geordi might have remarked, this one was in the line of a complete wall. The Doctor did not take him to task, however, but returned to her desk and studied the compscreen.

"Yes, I loved him," she murmured in a tone which Data could not quite identify. "I loved him very much."

Data ploughed on with his questions. "Intriguing. Did that love, then, differ from your love for the Captain?"

Crusher choked on the cup of coffee she was sipping. She stared at him wide-eyed. "Where did you get that idea?"

Data's head tilted to one side. "From my observations, it would seem the case. I am, however, not experienced in reading Human interactions."

"Don't be too sure..." Crusher muttered, shaking her head at his artless gaffe. She set the cup aside and gave Data an ironic smile. "Let's just file that one under nonreciprocation, shall we? Now -" She stood and ushered him toward the door. "- interview over. I have things to do."

"Oh. One more thing, Doctor."

The panels slid open as Crusher paused. "Yes?"

"Does your love for Wesley differ from your love for your husband?"

"Of course it does."

Data found himself expertly ejected from the office and as the doors closed he considered the point that Humans were often devious

in their methods of avoiding straight answers.

When Data reported to the bridge for his next duty shift, he found that word of his project had spread on the ship's scuttlebutt frequency. Indeed, Commander Riker was keen to know how the research was going. Data had to confess that his search became more contradictory as it progressed.

"You've bitten off more than you can chew, Data," Riker informed him. "Love has never been properly defined because it defies neat labels. It's a personal experience, and no two people will experience the same thing."

Finger raised, Data leaned forward to ask the inevitable question.

"Oh, no you don't," Riker forestalled him. "I'm not leading a discussion on the merits of love - it could get tacky." His smile broadened and a twinkle appeared in his blue eyes. "I'll tell you this - love is an experience every man should have. There's nothing to match it."

There was a noise of agreement from Geordi's direction followed by a snigger as Data guilelessly asked, "Is that being in love or making love?"

"Both." Riker turned round to include Worf in the conversation. "How about you, Mr. Worf? What's your opinion of love?"

The big Klingon cleared his throat, frowning at the viewscreen as he pondered his answer. "Human love is not a true expression of the emotion," he informed them. "Klingon love is deeper, more powerful - an exchange of respect between two warriors."

"Sounds heavy," murmured La Forge.

"It is more meaningful than Human fripperies."

"I'll take your word for it," said Riker, and that was that.

The conversation turned to more mundane matters such as course, speed and routine equipment checks, and Data had to forego his research until later in the day. It gave him time to organise his findings somewhat, and he came to the conclusion that more input was required. Counselor Troi said views on love varied according to age and experience, and it occurred to Data that Tasha Yar might add yet another dimension to his information. The only problem was, he did not know how to ask her.

While everyone else had been most helpful, Data felt a strange reluctance to touch on intimate matters with Tasha. Their encounter some months ago had never again been mentioned, but Tasha's assertion that 'it never happened' did not erase it from Data's memory and he still reacted to her on occasion with what he believed was embarrassment.

As events turned out, however, the opportunity to talk with Tasha presented itself without warning when Data walked into the bridge turbolift and was joined by Yar.

Data stood to one side, his eyes sliding sideways to gauge

Yar's mood.

After a few seconds of silence, the pert Security Chief regarded Data with curiosity. "Data, is something wrong?"

"No. Yes. I mean - "

"I see," smiled Yar. "Care to explain?"

"It is very difficult," Data admitted with some chagrin. "I wish to ask you something, but an event which did not occur is preventing me from doing so."

"Ah." Yar tried to keep back an even wider smile. *Don't*, she thought. *It's not fair*. "Why don't you ask, anyway," she suggested. "Or let me ask first - is it to do with your current research?"

Data studied her closely, but there did not seem to be the reaction he had feared. "Yes, it is."

"Hmm." Yar thought for a moment, rocking onto her toes as she did so. "Love is precious," she said finally, without a trace of a smile. "It's something to cherish, because you never know when it'll come - or go." A twinkle of mischief entered her eyes. "As for love-making... it's for the here and now, an experience to be relished, a present from one person to another."

The turbolift halted and Yar took advantage of Data's momentary silence to give him a quick peck on the cheek and a whispered, "If you need any further information, let me know..."

Data stared wide-eyed at the closing lift doors and his eyebrows slowly crawled down from their refuge during the kiss. Now he understood what Geordi meant when he said women were as easy to understand as Klingon culture. You didn't, you just accepted.

He was still standing there, oblivious of the computer's soft enquiry as to destination, when the doors re-opened to admit Geordi La Forge.

The helmsman waved one hand before Data's eyes. "La Forge to Data - anyone at home?"

"Yes."

"Whew - for a minute there I thought you'd blown a circuit."

"I was thinking."

"So I see." La Forge folded his arms and raised his eyebrows in one motion. "Going anywhere special?"

"Oh - not especially."

"I think you've been overdoing it, Data." La Forge directed his voice to the computer. "Ten-Forward lounge." He continued, "You need some relaxation."

Data considered the advice and decided it was a pretty good idea.

In the Ten-Forward lounge, La Forge ordered himself a glass of synthenol while Data made do with thin air. They headed for a table by a window and La Forge spread himself on a chair before downing a gulp of his drink.

"Whoa - I needed that..." he sighed, stretching expansively. "Double-checking co-ordinates for the next two weeks is not the most relaxing of jobs." He glanced curiously at his companion. "You're still awful quiet, Data. What's cooking?"

The android immediately glanced at the bar. "Nothing, as far as I can tell." The penny dropped and he looked abashed. "Oh - a colloquialism."

"Yeah." La Forge leaned forward in his seat, glass held between his hands. "Data, your preoccupation wouldn't have anything to do with this little project of yours, would it?" At the android's nod, La Forge sighed. "I know I'm going to regret this, but - tell me about it."

Three empty glasses later, Data had reached the end of his tale and La Forge the limits of his interest. Still, as Data was watching him attentively, he made an effort to pull himself together and formulate a reasonable answer. It wasn't easy.

"That's some project, Data. I think Commander Riker's right, you are attempting the impossible."

Data looked crestfallen. "Then you think my attempt to understand love is doomed to failure?"

"I wouldn't put it that way, but - "

"You are correct, La Forge," Data interrupted with a trace of sorrow in his voice. "Perhaps I cannot understand love because I am not Human."

"Are you crazy? Being Human isn't a pre-requisite for understanding it either."

"No, but at least you can experience it, whereas I cannot."

La Forge shook his head, knowing he should nip this self-pity in the bud before it sprouted. "Data, no-one says you can't experience love. Who knows what emotions you can experience? You're still learning."

Data remained unconvinced. "I do not believe love is possible for me."

"Oh yeah? Prove it."

"I cannot."

"Exactly." La Forge stabbed a finger toward Data. "If you can't explain why so much of Human culture revolves around love, then how do you expect to know if you can experience it?"

"I do not understand."

"That's my point!" exclaimed La Forge. "Love can't be understood. It either is, or it isn't. You don't wake up in the morning and say - 'I will fall in love today'. Love... happens, and

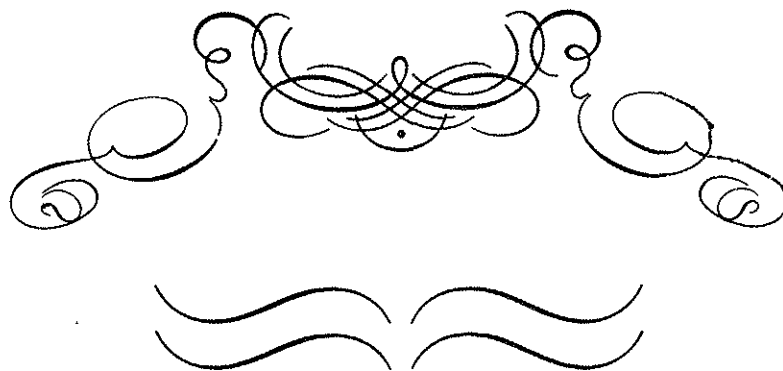
no-one can tell when, or even if, they will experience it in their lifetime, so what gives you the right to assume it's not for you?"

Data stared at him for a long moment, then, "You are correct. I was operating on an incorrect assumption, that I was incapable of love."

La Forge breathed a sigh of relief and relaxed back into his chair. Data's next question filtered through his weariness.

"What will I do if I fall in love, Geordi?"

"Wing it, Data. Just wing it."



Wonderframe Productions
Presents:

Highlights from the
ST:TNG Episode:
Get Naked Now

Out of sight! We finally
have an excuse to get
out of these uncomfortable
too-tight ST:TNG uniforms!



Hot damn!

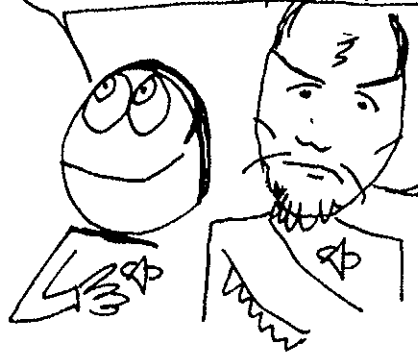
Ya mean I'll get
to breathe again?



Later, on the Bridge,
the Captain orders...

Data, be a good chap, and go
pick up LT. Tasha Yar!

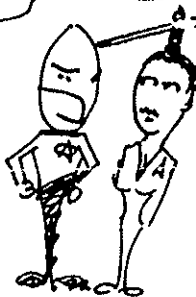
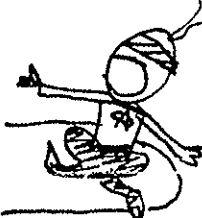
My, how astute of Captain
Picard, that he should pick
me, a bio-construct, the one
least likely to pick up an infection!



Don't count
on it tin-brain!
More likely
the Captain
picked you
because
you're the
one being
incapable
of lust!

When we last left our
characters, they had
just completed a planetary
Survey of... Los Angeles
with dire aftermaths

"Darkness, darkness,
be my pillow..."



Good. I won't
even mention
L.A.'s air!



Whaat!
Don't Tell
me my
people are
coming
down sick
simply by
drinking
L.A.'s water.



Inquiry: what
is "Smog"?

Oh Lieutenant!
Anybody at home?

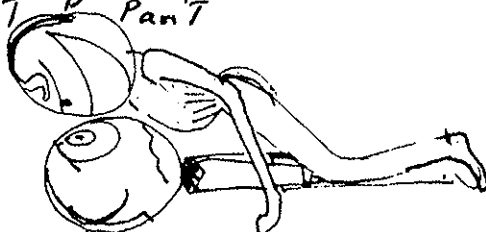


WHUMP!!

Pant
Pant
Pant
Pant
Pant
Pant
Pant
Pant

Any more questions?

Pant
Pant
Pant
Pant
Pant



Sorry I asked...

Back on the Bridge...

Captain, why are you sitting there scowling at nothing?

Shhh, Don't disturb me, Deanna. This is my great acting moment where I'm supposed to be a cranky idiot and not notice Data weaving in.

whoopie.

Data! Report to Engineering!

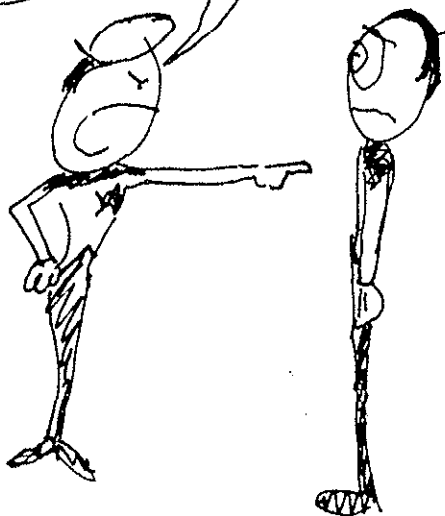
Why not? He can't do any damage there! It's only the most sensitive part of the ship.

Sigh.

Lissen Kiddo 'cause I'm only to say this once! It never happened!

Inquiry: "It"?

Yes! It never happened! And don't you forget it!



Later.. much later after Data has gone down To Engineering and replaced the engine's Dorito chips

C'mere Jean-Luc! Time for me to give you a belt --er-- I mean a shot!

My goodness, isn't it wonderful To have the ship fully functional again?



Inquiry: Is a Federation starship Capable of human sexu--

C'mer Buster! I want a word with you!

Shortly afterwards, Data Tells the Bridge crew the truth.....

I forbide you to leave Commander Data, even if the Enterprise is just a big set.

Naughty Naughty

Why leave now, Data?

Yeah! You can't walk out now Data, even if we are just a Television show! Why go?

Why stay in a sci-fi fantasy That never happened?

Honey, Where's the TV remote?

The End

PEACE TREATY

by

Sandy Catchick

The First Officer walked up and down the corridor outside the Captain's ready room, lost in thought. He was undecided as to the best course to follow, and this was something rare for a man of action. The reason for his dilemma, totally unaware of this, sat engrossed in his own thoughts less than three metres away. Finally Will Riker came to a decision. Within seconds his hand pressed down on the door buzzer.

"Come!" came the commanding voice of Captain Jean Luc Picard.

The Captain would have been surprised if anyone had told him that his voice alone prompted obedience in those of his crew who did not know him well. Those who did know him still reacted to the voice of command, but also owed the Captain respect on a more personal level. That voice had a special timbre of assurance that reflected the powerful personality of the man. A certain power exuded from him despite his medium build; it marked him as a leader, and someone who knew exactly where he was going and how he was going to get there.

Unfortunately on this occasion, although Picard knew what he wanted, he had no idea at all how he was going to achieve it. The goal was clear - peace. A small word, but like so many other small words such as life and death, love and hate, it stood for a great deal. The ideal was one thing. Sadly, where more than one person was involved, the reality was not always so simple.

It was the Captain's dilemma that had been the cause of the First Officer's hesitation. He knew that Picard was not happy about the Enterprise's current assignment, and he knew that the Captain wanted to lead the away team on their visit to Panacea, the neutral planet chosen jointly by Federation and Thor diplomats as the ideal location for discussion, and named with the idea of sealing a lasting peace treaty.

"Well, Number One?" asked Picard, snapping back to attention from his wandering thoughts. He already knew the reason for Riker's visit, however.

"Permission to speak plainly, Captain?" asked Riker, falling into the normal ritual.

"As always," answered Picard.

Riker almost smiled, but managed to cover his reaction by changing the action into a cough. Picard was not fooled.

"Something you find amusing?" he asked plainly.

Riker's smile disappeared. The Captain's reaction was predictable. They had been through this charade time and time again and Riker still wondered how he had managed to land the one and only Captain in Starfleet who still insisted in leading away teams

personally. That was something that had gone out of fashion. The trouble was he wouldn't want to change Picard for anyone else. That always stilled his hand. The argument itself was a serious one. Although Riker knew he was unlikely to win, he had to try.

"This is very serious, Captain. I do not believe you should risk yourself by leading the away team. Regulations make it quite clear that the First Officer can and should lead the away team in dangerous situations. I am expendable. You, as Captain, are not. And we are in no doubt that this is a dangerous situation."

That was the understatement of the year, thought Riker. The assignment had started out as a straightforward one, though one with little likelihood of success. They were to meet the Thor delegates at Panacea and discuss the basis on which a peace treaty could be signed. The Enterprise had been chosen as one of the best ships in the 'Fleet. Best in that she was at the forefront of Starfleet technology and therefore as able as any to defend herself. Further, Picard had proved his ability as a tactician and battle commander through several confrontations with adversaries as diverse as Q and the Ferengi. He had also shown himself able and willing to opt for the peaceful solution whenever possible.

They had arrived at Panacea without incident and taken up the prescribed orbit of the planet. Within minutes of their arriving on station they had been fired on, without warning, by the Thor. The Thor battleship had come from the blind side of the planet and had opened fire as soon as she had been within range.

Luckily Picard had been ready for them. He had been suspicious of the flight path assigned to the Enterprise and had expected a trap. Data had been asked to study the details and to make computer simulations of possible attack plans against the Enterprise. The android had quickly pointed out the blind spot in which the ship would find herself. Picard had taken the precaution of having extra powerful sensors designed for use. This was only possible because the sensors were channelled into the specific direction identified by Data. Geordi La Forge, their Chief Engineer, had enjoyed the challenge of designing the special sensors. Thus they had spotted the Thor ship the instant it had come from behind the planet and had gone to full shielding a good 30 seconds before the Thor had fired.

In that way they had maintained their desire not to be the aggressors, but had managed to repel the Thor attack without sustaining injury to crew or damage to the ship.

A long discussion had then taken place between the Thor Captain and Picard. The former claimed to have mistaken the Enterprise for a Ferengi vessel. Although a blatant lie, it was impossible to disprove the outrageous claim. Picard had settled for a verbal dressing down of the Thor crew's ability to use their sensors, and surprisingly that had led to a truce between the two ships, if a very shaky one.

Picard had lodged a formal protest that a ship requested to come to Panacea on a peace mission had been fired on without warning and without provocation, backed by his log of the timing of the events. Starfleet had responded that the Thor had made an official apology, and that none of this detracted from the Enterprise's duty to act as Federation ambassadors and secure peace if at all possible. Picard had already been informed that he had been chosen because he was a Starfleet officer on active duty, since diplomats were not recognised by the Thor as having any standing whatsoever.

Only military badges of office were of importance to them.

They were still orbiting Panacea. The Thor ship was in synchronous orbit with the Enterprise. Both ships had full shields raised. Both Captains had been ordered to arrange a meeting on the planet's surface in two hour's time. Both knew the risks this involved. Such a meeting could only take place if they beamed down to the planet. No-one would wish to be the first to beam down, since this was only possible with shields lowered. The Thor were a military people. They trusted no-one, not even their own fellow Thor. Riker was positive that if Picard ordered the lowering of shields, the Enterprise would be blown to smithereens and that would be that. If he were wrong, his next best guess would be that the Thor would take the away team as hostages to force a treaty in their favour. He couldn't let Picard lead the away team with that possibility remaining.

He was brought from his wandering thoughts by the Captain's reply.

"I appreciate your concern, Number One, but this is a diplomatic mission, and I for one am not going to lose face for the Federation by appearing too scared to meet the Thor in person. No offence, but nor am I going to insult them by sending my second in command, no matter how much I trust him." The last was said with a slight softening of the features that took the sting out of it.

Will Riker tried again.

"Surely it would be better if I made the initial contact and then was able to contact you and bring you into the negotiations as an ace in the hole."

Picard smiled. "A good negotiating technique, Number One, but first you have to start the negotiations. Somehow I can't see the Thor Captain negotiating with anyone below his own rank. It would go against the grain."

"And if he doesn't beam down himself?"

"He's not going to let his First Officer take the driving seat in something as important as this, Number One. The Thor are too militaristic for that. The hierarchy is everything to them. The trouble is that they like war for its own sake. Even the Ferengi only wage war when they have something to gain. The Thor do it for no reason at all."

"How do you intend approaching the peace treaty with them then?"

"I wish I knew, Will," said Picard, using Riker's first name. "Force is the only thing they understand. It may be that we will have to destroy their ship and their emissaries in order to bring peace. I will do that if I have to. Their mentality is such that I can see no other course. We must fight strength with strength, cunning with cunning. Captain Hansu's response to our repelling that little welcome committee is demonstration enough of their views of peace. We will only get peace if we can prove our ability to wage war. Let's see if anyone else has an alternative strategy to suggest."

Riker sighed understandingly. "Shall I assemble the officers in the briefing room in ten minutes?" he asked.

"Make it so," replied the Captain.

Before long Riker found himself back in the corridor. The question of who was to beam down remained unresolved, but he had a horrible feeling that he was not going to be the one.

The briefing room was already crowded when Picard entered. The babble of voices halted as soon as they noticed him. He took his place at the top of the table and asked for their opinions and suggestions.

Riker re-stated his fears of a Thor attack if they were the first to make a move towards beaming down. Data then confirmed that the Thor were known to have broken their word on previous occasions, but added that they never broke their word where they themselves considered it a question of honour. The problem was in identifying what exactly the Thor considered to be a question of honour. It was not the same as any known race in the Federation. The ship's counselor, Deanna Troi, a half-Betazoid who could sense strong emotions from those around her, advised that the only indications she had received from Captain Hansu had been of mixed fear and humiliation. Neither emotion was surprising considering the exchange of words with Captain Picard had taken place after the Enterprise had withstood the Thor attack.

The conclusion was that tactically the Enterprise was ready and able to withstand a Thor attack, and this was something that they should expect to have to meet. On the other hand, without some move on their part, the likelihood of obtaining any kind of peace treaty was so low as to be statistically invalid.

Will Riker pressed his argument for leading the away team yet again. Picard heard him out and then overruled him.

"No, Number One. I don't trust them any more than you do, but we can't lose face. I will lead the away team, but before we request a simultaneous beam down on both sides we demand an exchange of hostages. I don't want war, but I am prepared for it if it is necessary. We must cover our backs."

Data was about to enquire as to the meaning of the Captain's final comment when La Forge dug him in the ribs. The android did not find the action painful, but it did cause him to look at La Forge, and he quickly understood that this was not the time to ask such a question when he saw the look on his face.

The course of action set by the Captain was reluctantly accepted. However, working out the details of the exchange of hostages and the possible scenarios arising from this move took a lot longer. In the end it was agreed that Will Riker and one of Worf's Security men would act as hostages in the simultaneous exchange.

Some two hours later an almost identical tableau of people sat in the briefing room. One person, Will Riker was missing. The difference, however, was obvious. Instead of an animated discussion about options and possibilities, the briefing room was silent. The unnerving and unnatural quiet was broken when a furious and frustrated Captain Picard slammed his closed fist hard on the

table.

"Damn their impertinence and damn Starfleet for giving us an impossible task!"

"Explain," asked Data, the only one present who did not take his cue from the Captain's demeanour and refrain from questioning him.

Picard gave Data an angry glare. The android did not understand what he had done to warrant it, and his obvious confusion led the Captain to mellow a little.

"Yes, Commander, an explanation is in order. I am not angry at you but at the Thor and at the universe. We exchanged hostages in good faith, and now what do we have? I'll tell you. We have two lowly Thor ensigns, who aren't even dry behind the ears - and they have my First Officer and a top security guard. They are not playing by the rules. An exchange of First Officers and one other officer was agreed by both sides. Now their Captain has the gall to offer to meet me on the planet - beaming down simultaneously and alone - knowing he has already tricked me into exchanging my best man for one of his minions. I came here to get peace with the Thor, but it seems that they only understand war."

Another voice interrupted the soliloquy.

"Is peace what you really want?"

The question was simple, but it left the briefing room in stunned silence for a few seconds. Data was the first to react. He reached over, activated the communications system and announced "Intruder alert! Security to the briefing room. Intruder alert!"

Lieutenant Worf's security team arrived in under a minute, but although they arrived heavily armed and ready to do battle, when they rushed into the briefing room there was no-one for them to aim at. A gentle voice reproached them all.

"Is this how you seek peace? I ask again. Is peace what you really want?"

Security guards rushed around the room again, checking possible and impossible hiding places. There was nothing to be seen. Picard waved them to a standstill.

"Whoever you are, show yourself. If you are some Thor trick, remember that we are fully armed."

"I am aware of that, Captain. I have met Humans before. You say you seek peace, and yet you enjoy battle. I ask you to reconsider your motives. I am willing to help you make peace with the Thor."

"Who are you? Why should I trust you?"

"I am Aylebourne."

"Aylebourne?" queried Picard, the name jogging some long forgotten memory.

Data's yellow eyes froze for a second as he searched his memory banks for the key word.

"An Organian, Captain," responded Data. The android had found the information he needed and warmed to his subject.

"The Enterprise, under Captain James T. Kirk, last had contact with the Organians before the first peace treaty with the Klingons. The entry is in the ship's log. It seems that the Captain and his First Officer, and Commander Kor, leader of the Klingon occupation force on Organia, found themselves forced to make peace when the Organians intervened and prevented a war by making all available weapons, including the bodies of the protagonists, radiate a temperature of 350 degrees."

"Thank you, Commander," interrupted the Captain, cutting Data off in mid stride. "That still doesn't explain your presence here and now, Aylebourne. Nor can we be sure that you are who you claim to be."

"If you will protect your eyes, gentlemen - and ladies - I will reveal myself to you."

Even as Aylebourne stopped speaking the briefing room was filled with an exceedingly bright glow. Even Data was forced to cover his eyes. When the glow dissipated they all found themselves facing a very mild looking humanoid being.

Beverly Crusher, Chief Medical Officer on the Enterprise, was first to speak. "He registers quite Human now, Captain, but I would say that just before the transformation he registered as pure energy, pure thought."

"That is as prescribed for an Organian, Captain," added Data.

The Captain was not overawed by what he had seen. He was, however, prepared to listen and to be courteous to this being, whoever he was. "Well, Mr. Aylebourne, allow me to introduce myself and my officers."

The Organian interrupted him. "That is unnecessary, Captain. I recognise you all. Captain Picard, Commander Data, Lieutenant Worf, Dr. Crusher ..."

"I see introductions are unnecessary," interrupted Picard, trying to recapture command of the situation.

"Your aggression is unnecessary and unhelpful, Captain. I assure you that I have come here to help you. I have no wish to interfere with your command, only to show you what might be - if you are willing to pursue it."

"And what precisely is it that you wish me to pursue?" asked Picard, reminding himself that this being with the inane smile had just proved he was far more powerful than anyone on the Enterprise.

"Why, peace of course, Captain. That is what you came to seek, I believe?"

"Yes, of course I want peace. But not at any price. The Thor have taken my First Officer hostage, fired on this vessel without provocation, and show no inclination whatsoever towards peace. It would seem that they prefer war."

"As do you, Captain."

"Don't be ridiculous!" retorted Picard.

"I am not your enemy, Captain. I wish to show you the way to peace."

"Intriguing," broke in Data. "I have reviewed the situation from all angles and see no formula for peace. Is there some piece of information you hold that will change the equations?"

Aylebourne smiled at the android. "Your equations, Commander, are based on mathematical probabilities and possibilities in the situation the Captain has outlined between the Thor and yourselves. I speak of emotions, many of which will be unfamiliar to you."

"Many?" queried the android.

"You have come a long way in understanding Humans, Commander, but you are not torn by desires to fight or hit out at what you do not understand. We are a peaceful people and find Human and Thor emotions most upsetting. We offer you a chance to understand the Thor and yourselves."

Aylebourne turned to the Captain. "You are too far from Organia for us to prevent a war as we once did, Captain Picard. However, we wish to show you how similar you are to the Thor, and how it would be possible to negotiate a lasting peace."

Picard was sceptical. "And just how do you propose to show us the way to peace when all the Thor want is war?"

Aylebourne sighed. "How little you Humans have changed over time, Captain. How impetuous and short-sighted you are. There are but four of us here now, Captain Picard. I cannot force you to make peace. I can however show you how peace between Klingon and Human was first achieved, and hope you can extrapolate from that lesson and build a similar peace with the Thor."

Captain Jean Luc Picard was silent for a moment. A frown creased his forehead as he thought over the Organian's offer. He looked closely at Worf, the Klingon warrior. Yes, they had achieved peace with the Klingon, and yet Worf was one of the few Klingons serving in a largely Human crew. He was still very much the warrior, hence his rise to Chief of Security. But, nevertheless, he was truly a member of the Federation and a Star Fleet officer who had taken the oath of honour and had shown himself able and willing to stand by the tenets of peaceful coexistence. Yet many had said peace between Klingon and Human was impossible. It was now a reality. Could the Thor too become peaceful members of the Federation?

"I do not want war, Mr. Aylebourne. My task here is to secure peace. If you can show me a way to negotiate with the Thor I am willing to listen."

"That is all I ask, Captain."

Aylebourne explained that he and his three fellow Organians could show the crew of the Enterprise just how peace had first been achieved with the Klingons, but they could only show four people what had transpired since there were only four of them.

Picard did not see how this would help them achieve peace with the Thor. Aylebourne insisted that Captain Kirk had said he wanted

peace with the Klingon, but only realized that something within him wanted war when the Organians had pressed for peace. Picard too would be able to understand the situation better if he saw how the earlier Captain of the Enterprise had reacted to the threat of Klingon war, and how he had pursued war while believing himself to be fighting for peace.

"How long will it take for you to show me what you suggest?" asked Picard, still unconvinced.

"No longer than one hour," replied Aylebourne. "With the help of my fellow Organians we can show you what happened in the past. However, we only have the power to demonstrate this to four of you, so you must choose which people you wish to be involved, Captain. Each of the four will be able to link with one person from that time, including our own people if that is your wish."

Picard scratched his chin. Then he nodded. "I have nothing to lose by attempting this, Aylebourne, since I am not scheduled to speak to the Thor for another three hours. Since this will involve Klingons, I shall want Worf to accompany me. Also Deanna Troi and Commander Data. You may proceed, Aylebourne."

"A moment, sir" interrupted Data. "Is it wise for you to be involved when Commander Riker is already hostage to the Thor? That will leave us without a senior officer."

Picard let him have his say, then he replied, "I am aware of that, Data. However, I must be part of the away team if I am going to learn anything from this. There are risks involved, but I believe they are acceptable. Geordi will be in command in my absence. I do not believe the Thor will make a move before the three hours are up."

Aylebourne smiled his benign smile. "There is no need for you to be concerned, Commander, Captain. None of you will leave this room, and should the need occur we can dissolve the contact and you will be returned to the present time. All that will happen is that we will show you all that transpired on Organia. Our minds are too powerful for you to link with us directly, but we can present you with the essence of what happened without harming you. Each of you will be able to see the mind of one person. I leave it to you, Captain, to decide who should link with whom."

Data provided Captain Picard with the names of all those who had been on Organia. After some discussion it was decided that Picard would link with Captain Kirk, Worf with Commander Kor, Troi with Commander Spock and Data with Aylebourne himself. The Organian accepted their choice without question. A gentle light bathed the room, grew in brightness, and finally caused all present to cover their eyes. Aylebourne's voice spoke out to them. "It is done. Listen, look and learn."

The four participants found themselves looking at the world through eyes other than their own. It was a disconcerting experience. Nothing they thought or said affected the picture before them. Each saw only the past as seen by their respective host. It was not a whole picture, but the picture slanted by their host, showing only what he saw and how he interpreted it. The process seemed to last for ever, but in fact only took less than an hour. At the end of that time all four of them returned to the

present in every sense, finding themselves still seated in the briefing room, being the centre of attention for everyone else present.

Picard cleared his throat.

"Hm mh. That was quite an experience, Aylebourne. I think I see what you mean. We believe we seek peace, yet we attempt to achieve that peace through force. There is no trust between us, nothing on which to base a peace. You forced peace between Human and Klingon by incapacitating every weapon in both fleets. That is beyond our power."

Aylebourne smiled again. "That is beyond our power also, since we are so far from Organia, Captain. But the answer lies within you. Please consider what you have learned."

Picard nodded in acceptance. "We will review what each of us has learned. I will start, since Captain Kirk was at the centre of the trouble in more ways than one."

All the officers seated themselves around the briefing room table. Aylebourne joined them, smiling affably. Picard cleared his throat again, and began.

"I have to confess that Kirk's reactions were similar to my own in the face of the declaration of war between the Klingon Empire and the Federation. His very words were 'We didn't want it, but we got it.' However, I sensed a duality within him. As a representative of the Federation and as a man of peace, he did not want a war. As a commander, a warrior whose ship had just been attacked without provocation, he was ready and willing to fight back, to protect all that he held dear.

"Organia was a planet of strategic importance to both the Federation and the Empire. The Empire would do well to use it as a base and Kirk wanted to get there before them and prevent that. He was determined to show the Organians, in his view a primitive people, how their lives would be endangered by a Klingon army of occupation. He told them the truth as he saw it, and offered them Federation help against disease, hunger and hardship.

"The Organians were not what they at first seemed. His First Officer found that they were not a developing planet but one that had stagnated for tens of thousands of years. A further surprise came when the Organians advised that 8 space vehicles had gone into orbit around the planet and several hundred men with weapons had appeared. Not even his First Officer had been able to tell him that, although he pointed out that it was only logical.

"Kirk's first thought, as mine would have been, was for the Enterprise. His ship - my ship. He ordered his ship to flee and contact the fleet, not waiting to beam them back on board. He was much relieved when his order was obeyed. Only then did he consider the fate of his First Officer and himself. His First Officer worried him most. He could pretend to be an Organian, but how could he hide a Vulcan? The Organians provided the answer. Mr. Spock would be a trader in kevas and trillion and Kirk would be one of their own, Baronet.

"But the Klingons didn't trust the Vulcan and used a machine to

sift his mind and confirm whether or not he was telling the truth. Kirk became worried when the Klingons advised that the machine could be used to record every thought and every piece of knowledge a mind possessed, and could even empty a mind completely. He was not overly reassured when Spock told him he was perfectly well, since the Vulcan tended to minimise every personal injury. He wondered how Spock had felt, since the Vulcan was a very private person. Spock managed to persuade them he was telling the truth, using mental disciplines to maintain his shields, but Kirk still worried about him facing the ordeal. He also found it impossible to imitate the Organians completely.

"Kor noticed that he did not smile, and chose Kirk to be the go-between for him between Klingons and the Organians. Kirk didn't want the job and said so, but he was landed with it and couldn't refuse without giving himself away. The Klingons used their usual threat of killing a thousand local inhabitants if a single Klingon was killed.

"The Organians could not be persuaded to fight the Klingons and Kirk wondered if they were afraid of the threat, didn't understand what the Klingons would do to their way of life, or just didn't realise that they had the power to fight back. He decided that he and Spock should show them how to fight by blowing up a Klingon arms dump."

Picard broke off to look at Aylebourne. The Organian interpreted the interrogative movement of his eyes correctly.

"Yes, Captain. Just as the Thor view your non-violence as weakness, Captain Kirk saw our unwillingness to fight as weakness."

Data broke in. "Yes, the Captain thought you weak. But the Klingons accused you of cowardice."

"'Always it is the brave ones who die, the soldiers. You disgust me.'" quoted Worf. "Commander Kor held the Organians in contempt. We are and always have been a warrior race." He turned to Aylebourne. "Surely you who are so powerful must have a sense of honour? It is better to die a warrior than to live a coward. You handed Kirk over to Commander Kor. That was worse than cowardice. That was betrayal. I fail to understand how you can live with yourselves. It would be more honourable to die than to let that happen."

"But Worf, you don't understand," interrupted Data. "The Organians are totally peaceful. The Humans were being just as violent as the Klingons as far as they were concerned. The Captain had proved he was determined to destroy the Klingons just as the Klingons had proved they wanted to destroy him. To men of peace both reactions were wrong."

Troi spoke for the first time. "Yes. The Vulcan was torn inside. He respected the Organians' wish for peace, but he feared what the Klingons would do to them. The loss of life was abhorrent to him. He feared the Organians would be wiped out if they did not defend themselves, but he also feared galactic war. His duty to his Captain made it easy for him to join in the blowing up of a dump, with no loss of life involved, but he feared an escalation of the situation, bearing in mind the Klingon threat. He had some sympathy for their stand up to the moment where they betrayed Kirk to the Klingons. That to him, as to Kirk and Kor, was a betrayal of honour. He could not understand the Organians' action."

"He didn't know that no harm would come to Kirk," stated Data. "He could not understand that the Organians would prevent violence from all parties at all costs. They did not mean to let the Captain be injured. They only wanted to defuse the situation and restore peace in the only way they knew. They wanted the Klingons and the Humans to settle their differences peacefully."

"They had a strange way of showing it, Data," remarked Picard. "Betrayal of a friend is not a good foundation on which to build a peace."

"It is a possible opening, is it not?" queried Aylebourne. "It is the Thors' betrayal of your exchange arrangements that has led you to react emotionally to this peace initiative. Yet a single action by one person acting for reasons you perhaps do not understand should not cloud you to the possibilities."

"You expect me to trust the Thor after that?" roared Picard, suddenly very angry.

"No," replied Aylebourne sadly. "We expect little of Humans, Captain. We have come to realise that they are still men of violence, with only a surface veneer of civilisation. I only expect you to understand that you and the Thor are very much alike. You see your honour betrayed by the Thor action. The Thor Captain sees his honour escalated by the same action, since he has put one over on you."

"Query. What is 'put one over on you'?" asked Data innocently.

"Not now," grumbled Picard with a withering look at the android.

"The question is valid, Captain," stated Aylebourne. "Is it that you do not wish your honour to be more closely examined? Is it honour or pride which prevents you from making peace? Are you offended by the fact that the Thor took advantage of you?"

Silence filled the briefing room. Picard considered the question, which was after all a fair one. "Aylebourne, it is neither honour nor pride, but fear. How can I trust the Thor when they prove untrustworthy? Already my First Officer's life is at stake because I trusted them on the exchange."

"Examine what you saw of Kirk's mind. Did he not also fear for his First Officer?"

"Yes," replied Picard. "He too felt guilty that the Vulcan was threatened with insanity, a fate worse than death. Kor threatened to make him a mental vegetable. But he didn't let that sway his decision making. He thought not of one man but of the galaxy. A Klingon war meant more than the life of one man, even if that one man meant more to him than the galaxy itself."

"Then Commander Kor was right, Captain," affirmed Worf. "He said that Captain Kirk and he were tigers, predators, hunters and killers on a planet of sheep - both fighting for a universe waiting to be taken. There is great similarity between the two."

"No, Worf. The Klingons saw the universe as something to be taken, the Humans as something to be defended."

Aylebourne smiled. "Your Security Officer is wise, Captain."

Klingon and Human had much in common. Both saw their stance as a question of saving the galaxy from the other, of defending their honour, of fighting to survive. The distinction between aggression and defence is not always so easy when both lead to violence."

"But the Klingons were willing to kill innocent Organians. One thousand for the life of a single Klingon. We would never allow something like that."

"That is a Human analysis, Captain," replied Worf. "The Klingons could not afford to be generous to the conquered. The Empire needed to expand to survive. Only the fittest and the strongest would survive. That has always been our way. Commander Kor had no wish to kill Captain Kirk or Commander Spock. He admired the Captain for his stand and the Vulcan for beating the mind sifter - something he had been told was impossible. Klingons do not fear death as you Humans do. That is the difference. You see loss of life as all-important. We see honour as more important than life."

"Where is the honour in killing hostages, Worf?" asked Troi, with a shudder.

"The honour is in conquering and surviving."

"You mean the end justifies the means?" questioned Troi.

"Sometimes you have to kill," stated Worf calmly. "That is the heritage of a warrior."

"You are all warriors," confirmed Data. "At least historically."

"Yet we have grown beyond that. We think first of peace and co-operation. You as much as any of us, Worf, understand that," said Picard.

"No, Captain. I control my impulses, but the warrior is strong in me," responded the Klingon.

"As it is in all of you," stated Troi. "You are the warrior first, the builder second, Captain. You control your impulses also, but I can read them within you."

"But we are not like the Vulcans."

"No," replied Troi. "They have controlled for so long that the warrior is deeply hidden. But the instinct remains. The Vulcans think of peace first, but they react as warriors instinctively despite this. It is just that their thoughts control their instincts far more than most races. They would not deny their barbaric history."

"The pre-reform Vulcan was a more deadly warrior even than a Klingon," confirmed Data. "Records show that they were savage beyond belief before the time of Surak. They almost wiped themselves out with their hostility. That is what gave them the impetus to start on the road of logic over emotion. Their emotions were too raw. Far more vacillating than Human emotions."

"Mr. Spock recognised that fact," stated Troi into the sudden silence that followed Data's comment. "It is what allowed him to see the truth when the Organians forced peace on Klingon and Human alike. Kirk and Kor together took umbrage at the Organian

interference. Spock saw the necessity and while understanding the emotions of the antagonists saw their illogic. It was the warrior in him that allowed him to understand, and the logician and peace-maker that allowed him to see the truth. Perhaps we could learn from them, Captain. The Thor also want peace or they would not be here."

Picard nodded. "Yes, Kirk admitted being furious with the Organians for stopping a war he did not want. But it was the stopping of fighting on all planets that worried both the Human and the Klingon. Their forces would be stopped everywhere, not just on Organia, and that could lead to the loss of millions of lives."

"Someone has to make the first move," encouraged Troi.

"We did, and we lost Commander Riker to the Thor because of it," replied Picard.

"It is only the battle, not the war that is lost," commented Worf.

"You still think in military terms," said Aylebourne.

"You told the Klingons and the Humans that they would become fast friends and work together in the future," said Data. "Could you not also predict the outcome of our negotiations with the Thor?"

"I spoke of the long term. It was inevitable that you would work together, as Worf's presence here confirms. However, I did not read the future but predict the inevitable result. You and the Thor will work together also. The question of when is all important. We cannot force you to peace as we once did the Klingon Empire and the Federation. You are too far from our sphere of influence for us to be able to make all instruments of violence emit a temperature of 350 degrees. But we can encourage you to make peace."

"Why did you choose us and not the Thor to approach?" asked Picard.

"We had nothing to show them, Captain. We knew the Enterprise and hoped that you would be able to learn from the lessons of your predecessors - Human, Klingon and Vulcan. That is what your Federation is all about, in the final analysis."

"But Kirk and Kor conceded the end of war because of your influence."

"Yes, yet do you not see the similarity between them? It is that that finally allowed peace."

The room fell silent again. An hour had passed in discussion.

"Does anyone else have something to add, either from their insight into the past or from our discussions?" queried Picard.

It was Worf who came up with the suggestion.

"Perhaps there is another way, Captain. We cannot force the Thor to peace and their honour will not be satisfied unless we prove to be the stronger. I understand and appreciate this - and even their actions with the hostages. Captain Hansu felt that you won

the first round by repulsing their attack. He would lose face with his own officers if he did not get you at a disadvantage in return. He found a way to redress the balance by taking Commander Riker as a hostage in return for a mere ensign. I can appreciate his strategy although I deplore his dishonesty. There is a certain justice in his action if his own position is to remain firm with his crew. The Thor do not value honesty. We Klingons value it only when a word has been given as a matter of honour. It is obvious that the Thor do not see such an exchange as a matter of honour."

"I understand that, Worf," interrupted Picard. "How does that help?"

"A moment please, Captain."

In all truth Picard had to admit that Worf seldom spoke at length. He should not have interrupted him. It was his worry for Riker that was unsettling him. Will was important to him. He held on to the fact that Spock had been important to Kirk too. They had found a solution and he would also. He began to feel more confident. He just wished he could see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Troi smiled at him, sensing his change in mood.

Worf continued, "We are even at present, Captain. The Enterprise has repulsed the Thor ship and Captain Hansu has taken our First Officer hostage. If we move again the balance will go against the Thor. Captain Hansu cannot afford to let us take the upper hand or he will lose face. What we must do is supply a third party to force both the Thor and the Federation to peace."

"But the Organians cannot force you to peace this time," said Data. "Aylebourne has explained that we are too far from Organia for him to be able to stop a war."

"Worf is right," said Picard, suddenly smiling. It was the smile of the warrior, a quick lighting up of his face as a solution presented itself. It lasted only a moment before the Captain's features returned to their normal, calm, commanding planes.

"The Organians don't have to force peace. They merely have to appear as a stronger third party - one which the Thor and the Federation together can repulse. It is a strategy used by politicians throughout history. Take people's concentration away from their economic situation and from hardship by going to war against an aggressor. Almost the whole of Europe joined together to fight against Hitler. Yet Hitler came to power because he gave the people something to focus on other than their economic troubles. He turned their defeat and troubles into a war against the non-Aryan races, in particular the Jews. The third party was a figment of their imagination and posed no threat whatsoever, but because people felt threatened, through propaganda, they fought. The allies and the Germans both had something to rally against. What we need is something to join us and the Thor against a third party."

"We abhor violence, Captain. We will not be a party to it," reaffirmed Aylebourne. "That much should be clear to you by now."

"I don't ask you to be violent, Aylebourne. All I ask is that you project an image, a threat of violence. Something that the Thor and ourselves can unite against. Something that will draw us together as joint allies against a common enemy."

Aylebourne withdrew to consider the matter. The briefing room was bathed in light, plunged into darkness and then lit again in quick succession.

"It is agreed, Captain. We will not use violence but will give the Thor and yourselves an example of our power. Observe."

The room exploded in a mass of light. Everyone present covered their eyes. When they were able to uncover them without pain, the Organian had gone.

"Battle stations, everyone!" commanded Picard.

There was a pounding of feet as they headed for the bridge. Only Beverly Crusher moved in the opposite direction - a lonely figure heading for an empty sickbay. She prayed it would remain that way.

It was the Thor Captain, Hansu, who contacted them.

"Is this another Federation trick?" he queried angrily.

Picard wondered how he dared ask in view of the tricks he'd played on them, but then he read beyond the bluster to the fear. He could understand Hansu's fear. If he hadn't known it was the Organians, he himself would have been scared.

An enormous ship had appeared on the horizon - at least four times the size of the Enterprise or the Thor vessel. It was bright red, sleek and fast, as though it had escaped the fires of hell to get there. A deep, resonant voice had sounded in all their ears, for each in their own language. Telepathy. The voice had warned them that they were trespassing on someone else's space. They had no longer than two hours to clear the area before the vessel would fire on them. They could rest assured that no-one would be left alive if their warning went unheeded.

Despite his knowledge, Picard had felt a shiver go down his spine. The words had held a certainty about them.

Picard returned his attention to the screen and the waiting Thor Captain.

"I have never met such a vessel before, Captain. This is after all unexplored space at the rim of our respective spheres of influence. That is why Panacea was chosen for our negotiations."

"What do you intend to do?" queried Hansu.

"I have no option, Captain. My orders are to stay here until a peace treaty has been signed. As you know, we are already at full alert status. There is nothing I can do but wait."

There was a brief silence. Hansu's face was unreadable. When he finally spoke his voice was different, less assured.

"I too have orders to remain until peace is signed or you are destroyed."

Picard laughed, but it was not a pleasant sound.

"I assure you that we will not be destroyed by you. Certainly not within two hours."

He let the threat hang in the air. The pressure was on the Thor. He could see the Captain thinking it over. But Picard remembered what he had learned from the Organian experience and from his own officers, Worf in particular. Hansu needed a way out - one that would save his reputation with his own crew. Picard had to be the first to climb down, but he had to do so in such a way that he gained what he wanted. That was, after all, the art of negotiation.

"I have no desire to take on such a powerful vessel myself," he admitted quietly after allowing the Thor long enough to think things over. It was the offer of a straw to a drowning man.

"It is at least four times as large as our own vessels," confirmed Hansu, "but that would not prevent us from taking it on," he added for posterity.

"I too would be willing to fight," said Picard, "for something worthwhile. However, Panacea has nothing to offer the Federation, and this is not a part of space that interests us."

"The Thor Conglomerate has no interest in barren worlds," stated Captain Hansu.

Picard wondered how he was going to ask the Thor for the return of his First Officer and his Security man. He needn't have worried. As he paused to think that through the Thor answered the question for him.

"The answer is simple, Captain. We will meet on Panacea, sign the peace treaty and depart."

"There remains the question of hostages, Captain."

Hansu actually smiled.

"The situation has altered somewhat. Both of us have good reason to negotiate honourably, for our goal is now the same. I return your officers forthwith." With a grandiose gesture to his subordinates the Captain made the last an order.

Picard ordered the shields to be lowered and the two Thor hostages to be put in the transporter room. Riker and Tennant appeared in the transporter room just as the Thor hostages vanished in a beam of light. The shields were quickly raised again by both parties.

Picard cut in communications to the transporter room, confirmed that Riker and Tennant were unharmed, and switched back to Captain Hansu.

"Do you agree to the terms of the peace treaty, or are there some areas still requiring negotiation?" he asked the Captain.

"Negotiation and diplomacy are for weaklings, Captain. I am here to act. Shall we proceed?"

"I have to confess to being rather nervous of sharing Thor hospitality," said Picard, to the amazement of the whole bridge, except Troi, who could sense that he was not nervous in the slightest and was having difficulty in preventing the smile inside

him creeping to the surface. She found herself having to cough to cover her own smile, and Picard threw her a look strong enough to stop a charging horse.

"Humans are not renowned for their courage," stated Hansu.

Worf bristled at that, Geordi mumbled something about who the hell he thought he was, but not loudly enough for the comment to carry, and Troi's cough became uncontrollable. Picard stilled the bridge with another look, aimed at all of them. Silence worked for him yet again and the Thor continued.

"The Thor are not so weak. I will board your vessel to sign the treaty, Captain."

"Wouldn't you prefer us both to beam down to Panacea?" queried Picard innocently.

"As you yourself stated, there is little on Panacea to interest either of us. Your own bridge appears of greater interest."

"Very well. If you insist, Captain Hansu, I have little room to manoeuvre within the Starfleet orders I have been given. I will meet you in the transporter room with a guard of honour in five minutes. Please feel free to bring your own guards with you."

"I am quite capable of defending myself, Captain. I appreciate the honour you bestow on me. I shall be accompanied by my First Officer - the only one worthy of being party to this treaty. We shall both sign the documents to confirm their validity."

"I await your arrival with interest," said Picard.

As the communication was cut by Worf, on Picard's order, the Captain turned to greet Will Riker and John Tennant.

"Welcome back, gentlemen. I hope your ordeal was not too unbearable. Commander Riker, dress uniform now if you please. We have a Thor Captain to meet and a peace treaty to sign within the next few minutes."

"Haven't you forgotten something, Sir?" queried Riker, ever the efficient First Officer.

"I don't think so," said Picard blandly, already three steps ahead of his First and unwilling to lose the advantage.

"What about the alien vessel? Shouldn't we be preparing to fight it?"

"I don't think that will be necessary, Will. We intend to leave orbit long before the two hours are up. Once Captain Hansu and his First Officer sign the treaty we'll be on our way."

"What about the future, though? What about making contact with other civilisations? Isn't it our duty to contact the alien also?"

"It's a long story, Will. I'll tell you later. But to put your mind at rest, we have already contacted the 'aliens' and very helpful they were too."

Riker had to be content with that, and an exchange of looks with Counselor Troi, which did little to reassure him, since she was

obviously highly amused.

Captain Hansu and Commander Havin beamed on board the Enterprise without incident. The Captain was unseemingly hasty in his desire to sign the treaty and depart. The whole ceremony took only seven minutes from the moment they materialised in the transporter room to the moment they shimmered out of existence, to return to their own ship.

The ink had not had time to dry on the piece of paper in Picard's hands before the Thor ship raised shields, built up power, and left orbit of Panacea, heading back into Thor territory. A final communication from the Thor ship advised Picard that Captain Hansu felt the treaty was a great success and owed much to his own and Picard's command abilities.

Picard agreed entirely, and managed to hold the pose until the communication was cut.

As though on signal, the whole bridge then burst into laughter. Only Data, who never really laughed, and Riker, who didn't have a clue what was going on, refrained from joining in.

But Riker didn't have to wait long to find out.

Worf opened hailing frequencies and Picard requested contact with the Organians. It came, not over the communications system, but in their minds.

"Congratulations, Captain. You have learned. Your duplicity is to be deplored, but the cause of peace has been served. We shall return to Organia in the knowledge that peace has once more triumphed over primitive violence."

The peace had been signed, the Organians had returned home and the Enterprise sped on her way to her next assignment. Riker and Tennant had been brought up to date on the happenings in their absence, and the trick played on the Thor was something that would go down in the secret logs of the Enterprise, not to be common knowledge in the same way as the hard won peace treaty. All was running smoothly.

Yet one person remained disturbed. The Captain recognised this and called his Counselor into his ready room.

"You seem ... upset, Counselor. Is something wrong? Is it something to do with Commander Riker?"

The Betazoid smiled.

"It's nothing like that, Captain. But you are right. I am troubled. Perhaps you can help me?"

"If it's something I can do, just ask" said Picard, knowing how much he valued Troi's advice.

"It's more something you can say. When we went back to Organia, you observed Captain Kirk and I observed the First Officer, Mr. Spock. It seemed to me that although Spock was a Vulcan, and he

lived by the rules of logic, he was filled with emotions - emotions that he suppressed."

"Go on," encouraged Picard.

"We both are telepaths or empathes - half-Vulcan and half-Betazoid. I sensed perhaps more in him than I had any right to. But it seemed to me that he and the Captain had a very special relationship. He knew what the Captain thought even when the Captain said nothing. Only once did I sense fear in him. That was when he went to the mind sifter."

"That is hardly surprising. Anyone would be afraid of that."

"No. He was not afraid for himself, not even of insanity. What he feared was the revealing of his inner self - and the danger that that would pose for the Captain. He feared that the Klingons would use their knowledge of him against Kirk - and that is what made him hold out so strongly against their force, despite the pain. He hung on to the fact that to give in would enable the Klingons to hurt his Captain. I know Vulcans are always loyal, but this went beyond loyalty, beyond friendship even."

"You are stating what you saw. How can I help?"

"Commander Spock was a Vulcan. Half Vulcan at least. Captain Kirk was a Human. I have seen how the Commander regarded his Captain. I feel a great longing to know how the Captain regarded the Commander. I cannot explain, but it is very important to me."

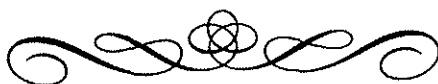
Picard nodded, understanding completely. "I know exactly what you mean. Your words about Mr. Spock confirm the view I had from Kirk's mind. I believe I mentioned that he held him dearer than the galaxy itself. We are both privileged to have seen a part of such a friendship. I know that Commander Riker and myself have become close since serving on this ship, but a relationship like the one between Kirk and Spock is something very rare. I could not hope to reach that level of trust. Perhaps it is because one is Human and one Vulcan - a rare alliance even today; perhaps it was just the kind of people they were. One thing I am certain of - such a close relationship comes only once in a million years. But what the two of them strove for on behalf of the Federation and on behalf of humanity in its broadest sense is symbolised for them and for us by this ship. The Enterprise still has work to do. We are lucky to be a part of that work. Luckier still to have been given a glimpse of the foundations on which our lives are built."

"Thank you," said Troi.

They left the Captain's ready room together, both happier and wiser people for the sharing of a special relationship between a Human and a Vulcan on another Enterprise with the same beautiful quest to seek out new life and new civilisation in the final frontier of space.

Troi summed up what they had learned from those two men, and got a grunt of agreement from the man of few words who was the current Captain of the U.S.S. Enterprise, and who symbolised their own quest to boldly go where no-one has gone before.

"The glory of creation is in its infinite diversity, and the way our differences combine to create meaning and beauty."





CUTTING THE STRINGS

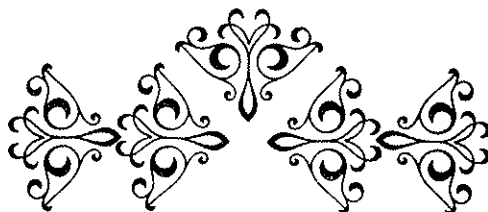
So, Commander Riker,
 You switched him off.
 And what exactly does that prove?
 That he wasn't a person before you switched him off?
 Hardly!
 If I take a newborn baby
 And slit its throat
 Does that prove it wasn't a person before I slit its throat?
 I think not.
 All you have proved is that Data has an 'off' switch
 And that you know where it is.

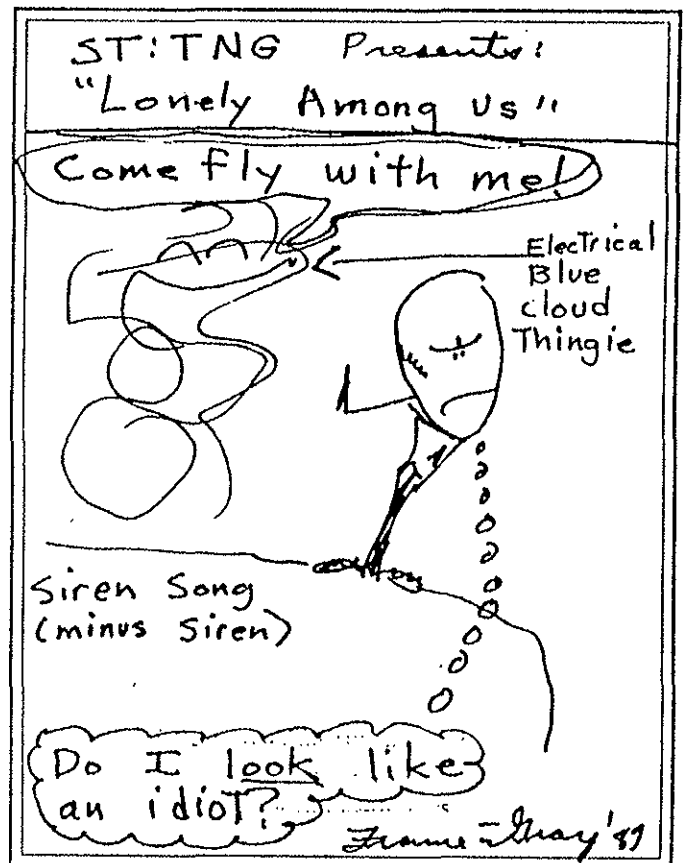
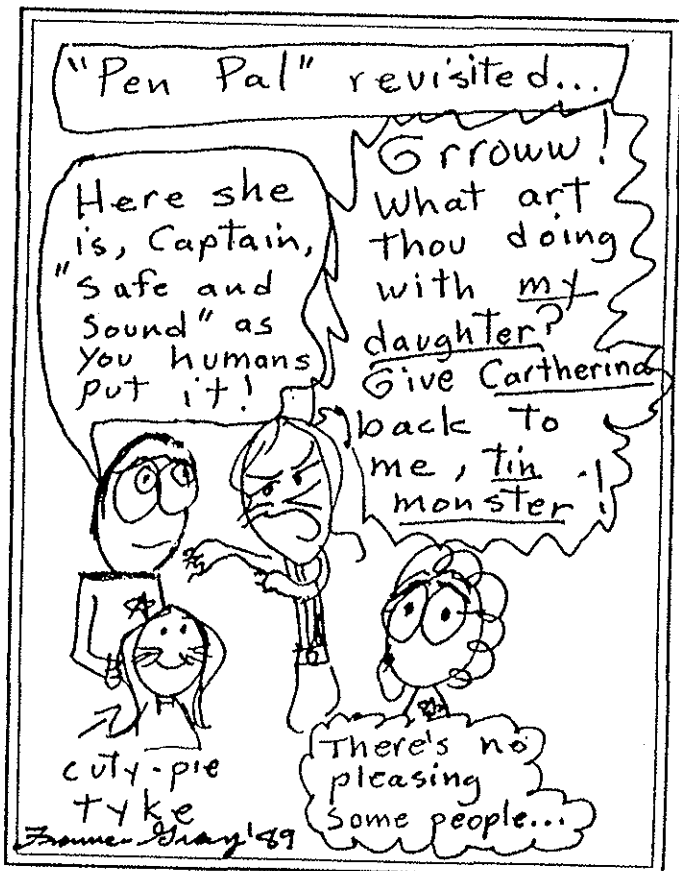
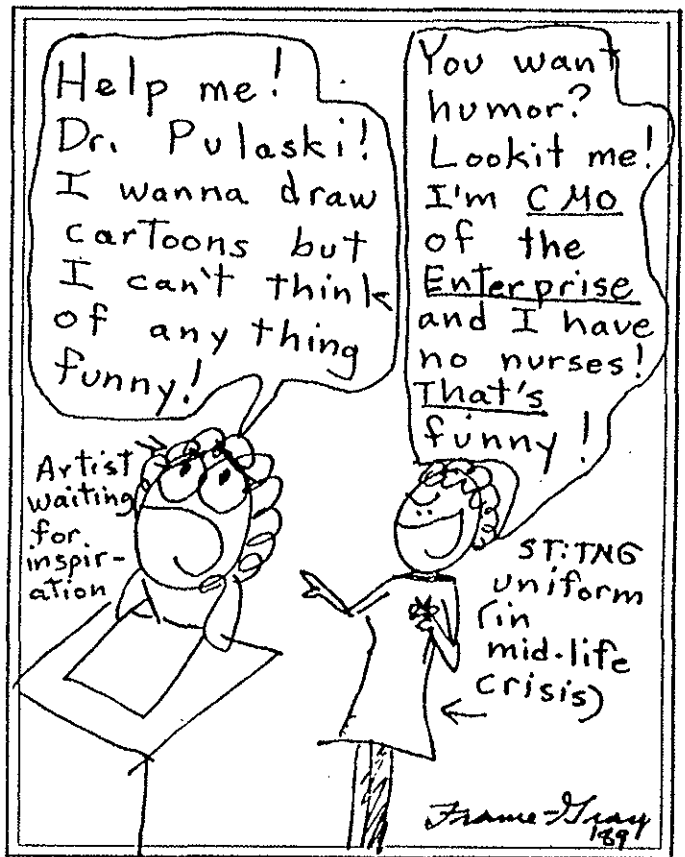
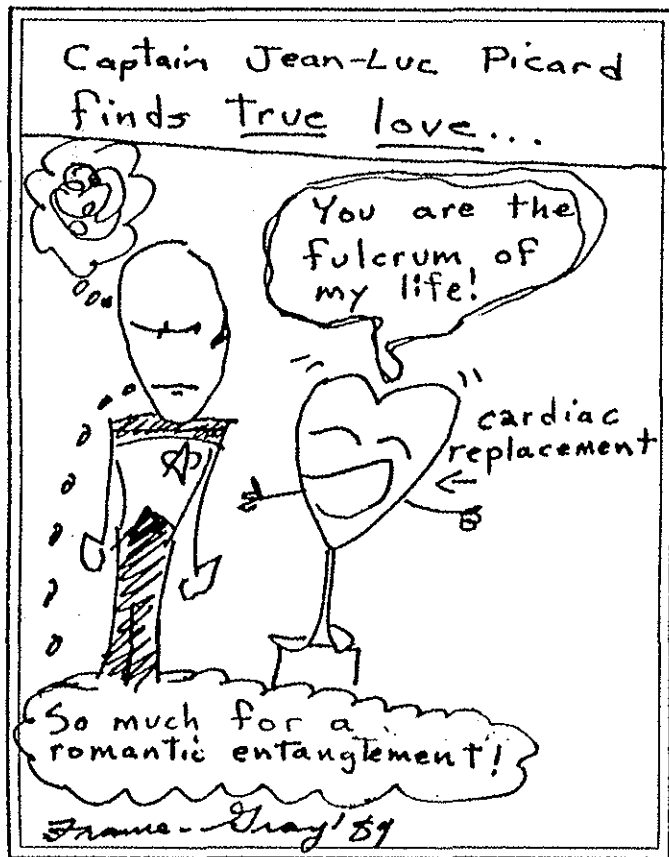
There is, of course, a difference between 'off' and 'dead'.
 A Human with its throat cut
 Cannot be switched on again.
 But does the vulnerability of organic life-forms
 Affect an android's legal status?
 Or an android's right of self-determination?

And what of your own 'off' switch, Commander?
 Any self-respecting Vulcan
 Could easily switch you off.
 A slight vibration at the base of the neck
 And you're off.
 Not dead -
 Just off.
 Does a predisposition to instant unconsciousness
 Prove there never was a consciousness?
 If so
 Then would the Vulcan neck pinch
 Deprive you, sir,
 Of your right to self-determination?
 Tricky!

So if you should win this case, Commander,
 The verdict could be far-reaching.
 If Data's 'off' switch
 Does condemn him
 To be the property of others
 Then Humans everywhere should take heed
 And beware their own 'off' switches!

Ann Peters





B I O M A S S

by

Scott Carrick

"Captain's Log, Stardate 49856.3. The Enterprise is exploring the Theta Zirconis star system, an unmapped region in the outer regions of the quadrant. There is one marginal Class M planet in the system, M-348 TZ 3. Since arriving in this system we have been receiving strange electromagnetic and gravimetric readings from this planet. These appear to be in the form of pulses or fluctuations in the planet's mass, diameter and electromagnetic spectroscopy readings.

"Due to the dense Van Allen Belt around the planet, we have decided not to risk using the transporter. Instead, I have ordered a reconnaissance/scientific team consisting of Commander Riker, Lt. Commander Data, Dr. Kate Pulaski, Senior Geologist Gomez, Meteorologist Adams and two security officers down in a shuttlecraft to try to establish exactly what is causing these strange readings.

"The shuttlecraft is equipped with an extra strong transponder homing beacon, so the ship can pinpoint its location even through the turbulent atmosphere. Landing personnel are equipped with environmental pressure suits, Phaser Twos, and Security Chief Worf insisted on taking a phaser rifle for extra protection. I am expecting the first report from the shuttlecraft momentarily."

Picard switched off the log recorder and leaned back in his command chair. He didn't like this, not one bit; there was something very strange about the planet below, and he didn't like sending crewmen into possible danger without knowing the odds.

They were all highly trained crewmen, he knew; but he didn't like it, all the same. Perhaps that was the problem - he was too scared of losing them if something did go wrong. Because the ship's sensors had difficulty penetrating the radiation belt round the planet, he had agreed that a scientific reconnaissance team should go down - but he was beginning to regret his decision. Picard frowned, worried, and bit his lip anxiously.

The shuttlecraft descended slowly through the 'atmosphere' of the planet, its small matter/antimatter engines whining as it fought against the buffeting of the planetary storms. Inside, Riker and Data piloted the shuttle, while Pulaski, Gomez and Adams checked their suits and scientific equipment. Worf and Security Officer Rawlinson merely sat at the back, apparently calm and nonchalant, but tense and ready for anything; the phaser particle beam rifle that Worf carried over his right shoulder was evidence that this was no picnic.

Adams was intently studying a small display panel on one bulkhead of the shuttle, which gave an accurate readout of the external planetary atmosphere. "The atmosphere appears constant - small traces of nitrogen, oxygen and carbon dioxide, but quite high levels of methane and ammonia. Temperature is a constant 20 degrees C."

"Sounds quite balmy," Riker interrupted with a smile. "But I'm glad we brought these environmental suits - the air doesn't sound fit for Human consumption."

"Quite right, Commander," Pulaski chipped in. "The methane and ammonia would destroy your lungs in seconds. However, a machine like Data could stay out in it for a reasonable length of time without any serious side effects."

"You forget, Doctor - " Data turned to look at her, his face serious - "that I breathe the same air you do. An atmosphere consisting of such high levels of methane and ammonia would be as hazardous to my construction as it is to you."

Was that a hurt look she detected on his face? Kate couldn't be sure - *Me and my big mouth again!* she thought. "I'm sorry, Data, I was forgetting that we are more alike than unlike."

"That is quite all right, Doctor - it was an easy mistake to make!"

Data turned back to the controls. Kate smiled to herself. That android was becoming more Human every day - sometimes he acted more Human than she did; she would have to watch what she said in future - she had forgotten how 'emotional' Data could be at times.

Worf broke in from the back. "When we land I will run a security check before anybody leaves the shuttle. Is that understood?" Everybody nodded or replied in the affirmative.

"And we all check each other's environmental suits twice - I don't want anybody going out with a leaky suit, is that clear?" Riker demanded. Six replies echoed around the shuttlecraft.

"All right, Data - we're at 10,000 feet altitude. Begin braking procedure."

"Yes, sir. Engines are - off," he replied, flicking two switches. "Braking procedure beginning - now." Data switched on the braking jets and the anti-gravity units. The whine of the engines died, to be replaced by the silent hiss of the landing procedure.

"Altitude - 5,000 ft, 4,500 ft, 4,000ft - all systems operational. Do we have a clear spot for landing?"

"Yes, sir - we are directly above a large plain - approximately 20 square miles in every direction. We are due to land almost exactly mid-centre."

"Good. Surface readings?"

"Surface is flat, quite hard but yielding. It should take a shuttlecraft's weight easily. Shallow surface covering - no large boulders or hollows."

"Perfect. Height - 2,000 feet. Switch on anti-gravity thrusters." Data leaned over, and threw some more switches. "O.K. everybody - seat belts on! It should be a soft landing, but we had better be prepared... just in case!" As the thrusters cut in, everybody felt the shuttle lift a little, then descend more slowly.

"Height - 500 feet. Holding steady," Riker said calmly.

Data's face appeared even more waxy yellow than usual in the glow from the shuttle's control panels. "All systems are go. Maximum braking in 5 seconds. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1."

The braking thrusters roared, and the shuttle's descent slowed.

"50 feet, 40 feet, 30 feet, 20 feet - prepare for landing!" Riker intoned. Several seconds passed, and there was a slight bump. "Right, we're down. Data - switch off the braking thrusters and all systems except life support."

"Yes, sir. All systems off except life support. Shuttle appears undamaged and stable."

"Good. Adams - weather check?"

"Same as before, sir - nitrogen, oxygen, carbon dioxide, but high levels of methane and ammonia. Temperature - 21 degrees C. Pressure - 996 millibars. Seems pleasant enough - with an environmental suit."

"All right. Everybody - helmets on. Check each other's seals and air supply - do a double check! It's better to be safe than dead!"

Pulaski gave a wry chuckle. "My thoughts precisely, Commander. A lungful of methane and ammonia is not my idea of fun!"

Riker smiled back and nodded affirmatively. Then he turned to his co-pilot. "Data, I'd like you to stay with the shuttle. I know you'd like to explore the surface but we need somebody experienced to remain on board in case we have to take off in a hurry, and you're the best qualified for the job. We'll keep in constant touch by suit communicator. Is that understood?"

"Perfectly, sir. My curiosity will have to wait until I read the scientific reports. How long will you be?"

"No more than 2 hours. I'll check in every 15 minutes. Keep the shuttle on standby just in case - I hope we don't have to take off in a hurry!"

"I hope so too, sir - but it will be ready should you need it."

"Fine. Is everybody ready?" They all replied in the affirmative. Riker snapped the helmet of his environmental suit into place, checked it himself, then got Pulaski to double check it. "Right - turn life support units on."

They all moved controls on the waist bands of the pressure suits. This regulated internal suit temperature, air supply and a force field to protect the wearer from falls or physical injury. Six green lights appeared indicating their suits were functioning perfectly.

"Worf - you can do your security check now."

"Yes, Commander. You've all been issued with Phaser Twos set on heavy stun. Data, any life forms?"

"No - the whole planet appears devoid of life. There is nothing within sensor range, not even plants or insects."

"Remain alert - we don't know what may be out there. Don't be afraid to use your phasers if you have to. I've brought a phaser rifle - just in case." Worf smiled - though the rest of the crew didn't know whether he was smiling or grimacing. "Stay together - we're safer in a group than singly." Worf nodded at Riker that he was finished.

"Right, people - let's go. Worf, you and Rawlinson go out first. And be careful."

The two security men headed for the airlock at the back of the shuttle. The inner door opened, they stepped through, the door shut and the lock pressure, atmosphere and temperature changed to match that of the outside air. Then the outer door hissed open and they were gone. The same procedure was followed by Gomez and Adams, carrying a pile of geological/meteorological equipment between them.

Riker turned to Data. "Send a message to the Enterprise. Tell them we are down safely and we're proceeding with our investigation. You can let them know you're remaining in the shuttle, and report in every 15 minutes. You can transfer messages from us to the ship by an open communication channel. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," Data nodded. "... Sir?"

"Yes, Lt. Commander - what is it?"

"Be careful."

"Don't worry - we will. I'll check our helmet communicators as soon as we're outside. Well, Doctor - let's go."

Pulaski smiled, and the two of them stepped into the airlock. After they had passed through, Data closed the outer hatch and re-pressurised it. Switching on the sub-space radio, he contacted the ship, and made his report.

On board the Enterprise, the bridge was quiet. Picard sighed with relief when Data's message came through.

"Keep the channel open, Data. Report in every 15 minutes."

Data acknowledged and switched off. Picard relaxed a little.

The planet appeared dead. The ground was grey and barren, the sky purple at the horizon, but jet black higher up. Riker had never seen such a desolate wilderness in his life.

The six landing party members gathered together in a group outside the shuttlecraft. "Stick together," Riker ordered. "Keep

within visual distance of the shuttle. I don't want anybody going off by themselves - groups of two minimum. Worf and Rawlinson, set up security posts around the shuttle, about half a mile away. But don't get separated - stick together!"

Worf grunted, and the two moved off, in a straight line from the craft.

Pulaski and Gomez both headed off for an interesting low rocky outcrop several hundred yards distant, laden down with a rock drill laser. Riker and Adams began lifting scientific equipment out of a small anti-grav unit which they had carried out of the shuttlecraft. Riker set up a seismometer designed to measure ground movement, while Adams inflated a weather balloon from a small helium cylinder.

Meanwhile, Worf and Rawlinson had established two security positions, within visual distance of each other. They stood on slightly raised ground about half a mile from the shuttle, a position which gave them a clear view of the shuttlecraft, the other four landing party members, and an area several miles around. Worf wasn't taking any chances; he kept in direct touch with Riker and Rawlinson through his suit communicator, and he held the phaser rifle across the front of his chest, finger near the trigger. Rawlinson, about 200 yards distant, was armed with a phaser two, set on kill.

"This place reminds me of the stories about the great Klagatt Desert on the Klingon homeworld," Worf said, to whoever was listening. "It is where Klingon warriors must go to prove their fierceness and strength by living alone for many months with no shelter or weapons. But at least there is life there - hostile and dangerous, but life. This place is dead and empty. Commander Riker, even I am uneasy here - I do not think we should remain for long."

Riker wasn't surprised to learn that even Worf didn't like this place - it gave him the creeps. It was like a desolate vision of hell or purgatory - a place where only the dead would be happy.

"Don't worry, Worf - we won't be staying any longer than is necessary. All we require are some preliminary soil, rock and atmosphere samples, and we'll be heading back to the ship - no more than half an hour. This place sure isn't designed for extended shore leave."

"Not even Klingons would spend shore leave here. Very good, sir - I'll be in touch," Worf replied, his finger poised on the rifle trigger, sharp eyes constantly scanning the surroundings.

At the rocky outcrop a short distance from the shuttle, Gomez had the laser drill erected, and was making final checks before lasering off a sample of the interesting grey/green crystalline rock, shot through with silver sparkles. Gomez swore it was shimmering and moving like a holographic image, but when he concentrated on it it seemed to stop. *Must be my eyes playing tricks*, he thought, and made the final pre-drill checks. While he worked on top of the low outcrop, Pulaski was about twenty yards away, getting some grey soil samples in test tubes and running tricorder scans for microscopic bacteria or viruses. Nothing showed up - the 'soil', more like fine interstellar dust, was devoid of any form of life. She still ran the tricorder over the samples for analysis when she got back to the Enterprise.

Gomez, satisfied with his safety procedural checks on the drill, informed Pulaski that he was ready to begin cutting samples. Kate acknowledged, switched off her tricorder, and stood watching from where she was; laser drills were precision instruments, but accidents in the past meant that only the machine operator stayed within a certain radius, in order to operate and manoeuvre the machine. Even Gomez had retreated about 10 yards, and was operating the device using a remote control unit.

"Right - here we go," he said, and pressed the activation button. The drill hummed as power built up in its miniature power pack; a second later a bright blue beam of laser light emerged from the lower end of the device and hit the rock directly below it, and in the centre of its three tripod leg supports. The beam continued for several seconds, and abruptly cut out. The powerful beam didn't appear to have had any effect upon the surface at all.

"My God - I don't believe it," Gomez muttered beneath his breath.

"What is it?" Kate replied, concern in her voice.

"The drill... Its power pack - all its power has been absorbed! It's only been on for a few seconds and it's totally run down - it's just not possible. The ground seemed to absorb it all... Hold on, I'm going to check it."

"Wait, Gomez - be careful!"

Their exchange had been overheard by the rest of the landing party. Riker and Adams had left their equipment and were looking in their direction; both Worf and Rawlinson were running towards them, their vantage points temporarily abandoned.

"It looks all right. I'm just going to check on the power pack - maybe it's malfunctioned." Gomez walked toward the drill before anybody could stop him.

Pulaski, being the closest to him, saw clearly what happened next, but her mind just couldn't accept it. As Gomez neared the drill, the ground surface began to ripple and flow outwards, rather like a stone dropped into a pond, with the drill at its epicentre. A split second later, the ground all around the drill seemed to rise up, stubby 'fingers' of surface material closing in on the drill and Gomez, rather like the pseudopodia of a gigantic, crude amoeba. The last she saw of Gomez was a look of shock and surprise on his face as the ground absorbed both him and the drill - and then she screamed.

The surface just seemed to close over him and then settled back down; but the minor ripple was building into a major tremor. Worf and Rawlinson reached Pulaski and pulled her back. The two security officers instinctively began firing at the surface where Gomez had vanished, to no effect. Rawlinson's phaser stopped functioning after several seconds; it had been drained.

"Get the Doctor back to the shuttle!" Worf roared above the thunderous din. "I'll remain here and try to hold it off!"

Rawlinson nodded, and quickly pulled the shell-shocked Doctor in the direction of the craft.

Riker had overheard everything and shouted into his suit

communicator. "Data! Prepare shuttle for emergency lift-off! We're all coming on board!"

"Yes, sir," Data replied, calmly but quickly. "The shuttle is powered up - all systems on. I will open both airlocks simultaneously - with a face mask, I can survive in a vacuum for the time it will take you to get on board. Ready when you are."

"We're coming now. Let Picard know we're in trouble and we're taking off as soon as possible!"

"Yes, sir. Data out."

Adams and Riker moved to assist Rawlinson with Dr. Pulaski, who was moving but seemed dazed and in shock. Adams and Rawlinson lifted her between them and headed for the shuttle, closely followed by Riker. Looking over his shoulder, Riker saw Worf still firing the particle beam weapon at the ground.

"Hurry up, Worf! We're leaving. You can't help Gomez now - he's gone!"

Worf grunted and fired one last burst. The rifle suddenly died - all power was gone. Disgusted, Worf threw the rifle with all his might, turned and ran.

As Adams, Pulaski and Rawlinson reached the shuttle, Riker shouted "Right, Data - open the doors - we're here!" Data, anticipating Riker's call, had both doors open in less than a second. The three landing party members virtually fell through the airlock, and quickly moved to the back of the shuttle. Riker reached the doorway, turned and shouted once more. "Come on Worf - run! We're not going anywhere without you!"

Worf sprinted the last hundred yards, the ground rippling and buckling behind him, the air filled with a thunderous roar, combined with the high pitched whine of the shuttle's engines as they reached full power. Riker moved inside and quickly seated himself, buckling himself in. Worf glanced behind as he reached the shuttle, saw the 'ground' lifting up towards him, and dived through the shuttlecraft's doorway, doing a commando roll to break his fall; luckily he missed the other occupants, coming to rest against the far wall. Data had the door closed and the shuttle off the ground before Worf had come to a stop.

"Well done, Data - now get us out here! Strap yourselves in or hang onto something solid - this is going to be rough!" Riker shouted above the roar. The shuttlecraft occupants hung on for dear life as the engines roared to full power, pushing them skyward.

On the Enterprise, Picard and the rest of the crew knew very little of what was going on. Data had been checking in regularly - he had just completed his second 15 minute radio message when Wesley, sitting at the navigation console, suddenly shouted, "Sir - something's happening to the planet - look!"

All eyes turned to the main viewscreen. The Enterprise was directly above the area of the planet where the shuttle had touched down - this was to keep a strong radio link and keep homed in on the transponder beacon aboard the shuttlecraft. Picard gasped. The surface directly below them was heaving and rippling like the

surface of the ocean in the grip of a vast hurricane-like storm. From space it looked uncannily like a giant circular wave, rippling outwards - and Picard didn't like it one bit.

Stabbing the communicator button on the arm of his chair, he roared, "Data! What the hell's going on down there?"

There was several seconds silence, broken only by the hiss caused by the turbulent atmosphere. Then Data's voice came through, weak and broken up by the interference, but unmistakably Data. "Sir - I have just received a report from Commander Riker... landing party in trouble - we're attempting emergency take-off... Please stand by - we may require assistance. I will communicate again as soon as I am able."

There was a low whistle from La Forge at the engineering station at the back of the bridge. "Unbelievable!" he uttered, staring at the viewscreen.

"Report, Lieutenant," Picard snapped. "What can you see?"

"As near as I can tell," La Forge began, "the whole planet appears to be breaking up. I can see wild fluctuations in gravity, electromagnetic and radioactive readings - and the whole geological structure appears to be breaking down. The colours are... out of this world!" La Forge suddenly groaned, and covered his VISOR with his hand. "Wow - that was bright. I think my eyes are overloading!"

As La Forge turned back to Engineering, Picard shouted to Wesley, "Ensign - plot a minimum orbit that will take us in as close as possible without endangering the ship. We have to get a fix on that shuttlecraft!"

"Yes, sir!" Wesley replied, turning back to his console.

Picard turned once more to the Chief Engineer. "La Forge - I'd appreciate you taking the helm - this could be dangerous and we need the best man on the job."

Geordi nodded and moved to the helm position. "Relieving you," he said, as the young crewman at the helm vacated the seat.

"Orbit plotted, sir - we have the shuttle's transponder beacon locked in!" Wesley reported.

"Good - don't lose it! Geordi, take us down - but not too close. We've got to get a tractor beam on that craft!"

"Aye, sir - we're on our way."

Picard returned to his central seat - but his eyes never left the main screen. He sat down, and began tapping the armrest nervously.

Aboard the shuttle, all hell had broken loose. The six occupants were well strapped in, but the small ship was being tossed around like a leaf in a gale. Riker and Data were handling the controls as well as they could - but the situation was out of their control; Riker had to shout to be heard above the roar of the engines."

"What's our altitude, Data?"

"It's difficult to say with complete accuracy, sir - approximately 500 miles, but the surface of the planet keeps shifting - the altitude indicators aren't functioning correctly."

"If we're 500 miles above the surface, why are we being kicked around so violently?"

"I believe the planet is breaking up - we are experiencing severe gravitational anomalies of the sort usually associated with complete tectonic degradation and planetary disintegration. There must be severe volcanic activity occurring on the planet below us."

Dr. Pulaski, who had recovered partially from her frightening experience on the planet below, butted in. "That was no volcanic activity. I saw the ground rise up and swallow Gomez!"

Data, astounded by Kate's statement, turned to ask something - but a sudden lurch brought him back to the controls abruptly.

Adams, who had been keeping checks on the outside atmosphere, spoke next. "I agree with Data - the gravity of this planet is fluctuating wildly - and the atmosphere appears to be leaking off into space!"

"What?" Riker snapped incredulously.

Data leaned over and looked at Adams' equipment. "Confirmed, sir - the disintegration of the planet below has resulted in the gravitational turbulence we have been experiencing - and the atmosphere is being rapidly dissipated into space."

"But what could be causing all this? This isn't like any planet I've ever been on before."

"Sir, I am evaluating a theory - and if I am correct, both ourselves and the Enterprise are in great danger."

"Explain."

On the ship Picard was getting impatient. They had been trying to get through to the shuttlecraft for about five minutes, but with no luck. They were still locked onto the transponder beacon, and had moved as close to the planet as possible; the gravitational disturbances were growing, however, and the Enterprise was having difficulty maintaining a steady orbit.

"At the first sign of serious damage to or possible destruction of the ship, be prepared to get us the hell out of here. But let's hope we can get our people before we have to make such a decision."

"Yes, sir," Geordi concurred.

Suddenly the open communications channel came on. The sound was badly garbled, but they could still make out Riker's voice. "Shuttlecraft Galileo to Enterprise - Commander Riker speaking. If you can read us, Enterprise, you must leave orbit immediately - you are in grave danger. Don't attempt to rescue us - there isn't enough time. Get the ship out of danger!"

"Riker, this is Picard. We have a fix on you - we are locking on tractor beams. We will pull you on board."

"No, Captain - there is no time!"

"La Forge - do you have tractor beams on the shuttlecraft?"

"Yes sir - two. But the turbulence out there is making the fix difficult."

"Put another two beams on it!"

"But - "

"Make it so!"

"Aye, sir - four beams on the shuttle - Sir! Look at the planet!"

Picard turned to the main viewscreen, and gasped. A large mass of the planet was extending like a tentacle out into space - a distance of over 2000 miles - and the end of it was shaped like a giant claw. And it was heading towards the shuttlecraft.

"La Forge - pull the shuttle in immediately!"

"Sir - the tractor beams aren't powerful enough. We won't be able to get the shuttle into the bay in time!"

"Put another tractor beam on it."

La Forge complied. The shuttle was only about 150 miles away from the Enterprise - but it might as well have been 1,500 miles. Even with 5 tractor beams on the shuttle, the turbulence was too great, hampering their power. And the 'claw' was going to reach the shuttle before they reached the ship.

"La Forge - will we get the shuttlecraft aboard in time?"

"Negative, sir - that 'thing' is moving too fast."

Picard bit his lip, deep in thought. "If we put a tight transporter beam down between the tractor beams, and we use all our reserve power, could we beam them up - even with all that turbulence and interference?"

"Maybe, sir - but it's risky."

"Well, Mr. La Forge, it doesn't look as if we have much option."

Picard went to his chair, and opened intraship communications.

"Transporter room 3 - lock onto the crew of the shuttlecraft. On my order, beam them over using all available power. Understood?"

Transporter Chief O'Brien replied, "Yes, sir. I have a lock on them. Ready to beam on your order, using full transporter power."

"Good. Riker - do you read me?"

"Yes, sir - but the signal is not clear."

"We're going to beam you aboard using all available power - prepare yourself."

"Captain - strongly advise against it - turbulence too great!"

"We have no choice, Number One - the shuttle won't make it back in time. Mr. O'Brien - are you ready?"

"Yes, sir. I have a strong lock... all available power to the transporter - now!"

The lights on the bridge dimmed, and then steadied at a lower level.

"Right, Mr. O'Brien - get them aboard!"

In Transporter Room 3, O'Brien moved the controls; the hum of the transporter in action began. On the bridge, Picard and the rest of the bridge crew were gazing in horror at the scene below them. The planetary extension had almost reached the shuttlecraft. Even as they watched, the 'claw' closed around the craft, swallowing or 'absorbing' it completely.

Worried, Picard shouted into his communicator, "Mr O'Brien, do you have them?"

"I'm trying to bring them in, sir, but the turbulence out there is distorting and breaking up the signal!"

"I'm coming down. Hold until I get there. Mr. La Forge - you have the bridge."

"Aye, sir." As Picard walked into the turbolift, La Forge sat in the Captain's seat.

When he reached Transporter Room 3, Picard could see O'Brien frantically moving controls, trying to bring the landing party aboard. There were six columns of sparkling transporter light on the pads, but they were shimmering, oscillating wildly - not the usual steady beaming signal.

"O'Brien, reverse power, and boost the transporter signal!" Picard snapped.

"Yes, sir, I'm trying that - but its not doing much good!"

"Well, hold the signal and tie in the ship's main electrical circuits!"

"Aye, sir, working on it. That might just do the trick!"

Picard's communicator bleeped. "La Forge here sir. The whole planet has - disintegrated! It seemed to shimmer wildly, and then broke up into thousands of fragments, but its not acting like any planet I've seen before. It appears to be composed of some form of energy/matter, and it's heading towards us!"

"Lock on forward phasers!" Picard ordered. "Fire a short burst at the nearest mass - if it has no effect, fire again. But we can't afford to waste too much power - we're still trying to get our people on board!"

"Aye, sir." On the bridge La Forge shouted at Wesley, "Fire forward phasers on my order - now!"

Wesley complied. The two bright blue beams sliced through space and struck the nearest planetary mass, the 'claw' which had swallowed the shuttle, and which was now very close to the ship.

The phaser beam did not seem to have any effect - in fact, the 'planet' appeared to absorb it. After a few seconds, the beam cut out.

"Wesley, what happened?" La Forge demanded.

"It appeared to absorb the phaser power - both forward phasers are drained!"

Incredulously, La Forge contacted Picard. "Captain, the planet just absorbed all our phaser power. We only have fifty percent power to shields left! It's drained half of our power!"

"Don't fire again! Conserve all power, but bring deflectors and shields up twenty percent! We need all our remaining power to get the landing party aboard!"

"Acknowledged, sir!"

In Transporter Room 3, O'Brien and Picard were working frantically on the transporter. O'Brien had the main panel off and was making delicate adjustments. Turning a final control, he sighed and replaced the main panel.

"That's it, sir. I've bypassed the main control, and we have their individual signals stored in the computer."

"Then bring them in. I just hope we have enough power left!" Picard said gravely.

O'Brien nodded, and moved the controls. The hum built up again, and the six colours of light returned. This time however, they didn't fluctuate, and a moment later the six shuttlecraft crew members materialized on the transporter pads.

"Riker - good to see you again!" Picard said, smiling.

"Likewise, Captain. I thought we were going to die out there."

As Riker, Picard, Worf and Data headed for the bridge, the First Officer filled the Captain in on what had happened on the planet, including the death of Gomez. He also told him how the 'planet' had absorbed the energy from the laser drill.

"That would explain what happened to our phasers."

"Why, what did you do?"

"We fired a short burst at the mass of planetary material heading towards us, and it absorbed it - drained the phaser banks completely. Power down by fifty percent."

Riker nodded. "I don't know what that 'thing' is out there, but it seems to live on energy. It homed in on the shuttlecraft's engines, and absorbed it - if you hadn't got us out of there we would have been crushed."

The turbolift doors opened, and the four officers stepped onto the bridge. La Forge instantly vacated the Captain's seat and filled Picard in on what was happening. "Sir, the power drain from the phasers combined with the tractor beams and the transporter overload has seriously weakened us. We have impulse power, but not enough to go to warp speed - not even warp one. We'll need several hours to power up and get the warp engines back on line."

"Very well, Chief Engineer - do the best you can."

All eyes were on the main viewscreen. The whole 'planet' had gone, to be replaced by a swirling mass of shimmering multicoloured shadows and shapes - to Picard, the closest words he could think of to describe them were 'living flames'. And they were heading for his ship.

"La Forge, get us out of here. Maximum impulse power. Give it everything we've got. If that -," he nodded at the viewscreen - "thing or things reacts to us we'll be absorbed just like the shuttle. We've got to outrun them!"

"Aye, sir." La Forge contacted Engineering, and in seconds they were moving away from the 'planet' at maximum impulse.

Everyone on the bridge was tense. Picard asked for opinions from his crew. "Let's try to work out what we're dealing with here. Data, have you come to any conclusions?"

Data, who had relieved the Yeoman at the Helm Console, turned in his chair. "As far as I can tell, sir, what we are seeing is a multitude of energy beings. There are no records of such beings in the library computer; there are records of similar ones, but none the same. I think they can be classified as life, though not like anything we have dealt with before. Apparently they formed a single mass and converted themselves into the appearance of a real planet to trick us or any other passing 'energy source' into landing."

"Are you saying this was a trap?"

"Quite possible, sir - analogous to a carnivorous plant, known as the Venus Fly Trap."

"But how could it, or they, mimic the appearance of a real planet?"

"Unknown, sir. But it must have required vast amounts of energy for the conversion process, and they are now drained, looking for energy."

"And we are that 'energy source'."

"Quite so, Captain."

Picard turned to Counselor Troi, sitting on his left hand side. "Counselor, are you picking up thoughts, impulses, anything at all?"

Troi shook her head. "No, Captain - if these are living beings they do not 'think' or communicate as we do. I am not receiving anything at all. To them, we do not exist - all they want is 'energy', they want to absorb this ship for the power it contains. They probably do not even know there are living creatures aboard."

"I agree with Counselor Troi, sir," Data chipped in. "We cannot communicate. They must exist on a different physical plane from us - a place of pure matter energy. Possibly they consist of some form of plasma material."

Riker butted in. "You mean they're not solid or even gaseous?"

"Precisely, Commander."

"Well, Data, Riker, what is our best plan of campaign? We have to prevent them from absorbing the ship, or we'll all die. Recommendations?"

"We have seen how they absorb matter, or more correctly, positive energy," Data continued. "We could therefore see what effect negative energy would have on them."

"You mean antimatter?"

"Yes sir. It might make them 'back off'."

"Or give them a bad stomach-ache." Riker smiled. "I agree with Data - let's try some antimatter."

Picard nodded and turned to Geordi and Worf. "Mr. La Forge - prepare a magnetic canister of antimatter for ejection through our forward photon torpedo tubes. Worf, help him. Launch on my order."

The two officers acknowledged and headed for engineering. The bridge remained silent but tense for the next few minutes; then La Forge came on the intercom. "Sir, we have placed a magnetic canister in one of the torpedo tubes. I've rigged up a 30 second delay fuse."

"Very good, La Forge - prepare to fire."

"Aye, sir."

"FIRE!"

The unmistakable streak effect of a firing photon torpedo shot out from the bow of the ship, straight at the mass of 'living flames'. The countdown began.

"5 seconds to detonation," Data intoned. "4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - 0!"

The main viewscreen had been dimmed in anticipation of the coming explosion. Nothing happened. After a few seconds, Picard sighed. "No effect. Data, can you determine what happened?"

"Apparently these 'beings' also absorb negative energy. They must be composed of matter even beyond the plasma stage. Nothing in the universe can absorb matter and antimatter - at least, nothing that has been encountered until now."

"Well," Picard sighed, "it looks like we'll just have to re-write the physics books. We've been presented with an anomaly outside our experience, and if we don't make the right decision now, it will be the end of us. And who knows what these creatures could do if they reached a densely populated part of the galaxy?"

"Theoretically," Data began, "they would absorb all the energy sources of the entire Federation, Romulan and Klingon Empires,

resulting in total entropy."

"We've got to stop them here," Picard mused. "But how?" His mind was working overtime.

Data spoke once again. "Captain, I find it strange that when we first encountered the 'planet', the creatures did not absorb us straight away. It wasn't until Gomez began drilling that the trouble began."

"Meaning?" Picard asked.

"Well, sir, possibly after being deprived of energy for some time they coalesce together into a planet-like mass and conserve their energy levels."

"You mean like hibernation, or some form of sleep?"

"Yes, sir, though dormant would be more technically accurate than sleeping."

"What are you proposing?" Picard asked.

"Well, sir, as it does not appear that we can return them to their dormant state, we could possibly try the opposite."

Picard smiled, "Ah, Mr. Data I see what you're getting at. We could fire a photon torpedo containing as much matter/antimatter as we can spare, get as far away as possible, detonate it, and hope that they will have gorged themselves so much that we can escape."

"Precisely, sir."

"Good. Excellent! Riker, do you agree?"

"Yes, sir - it seems the only possible solution. As we cannot communicate, we'll have to throw them some 'meat', and hope they take the bait."

Picard contacted Engineering, "Mr. La Forge, the 'creatures' absorbed the antimatter. No effect!"

"What?" La Forge replied, disbelievingly.

"That's right - didn't harm them at all. So instead we're going to try and gorge them. Geordi, how much matter/antimatter from the warp engines can we spare just now?"

"Not much, sir, what with all the power we've lost and used up. Possibly one to two kilograms."

"Good. That should be sufficient. I want you to rig up a matter/antimatter explosive device with a five minute delay fuse - we'll need that time to get clear of the area."

"It'll be tricky, sir, but I'll get onto it."

"Good. How soon before we have warp power?"

"I have three teams working on the engines now - should have warp capability restored in about half an hour. But only warp one!"

"Excellent - that should be enough. After you've removed the

matter/antimatter for the bomb, *all* available power is to be diverted to the warp engines. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir. We'll cut life support back to the bare minimum - heat and light. We can run on emergency lighting for a while and reduce power to the shields and deflectors."

"Good - make it so." Picard turned to Wesley at the navigation console. "Mr. Crusher, plot a spiral orbit in towards the sun in this system - minimum impulse power - but stay ahead of these 'creatures'. We can't afford to let them catch up with us!"

"Yes, sir. Orbit plotted and laid in. Implementing now!"

The Enterprise veered to the left and began moving in towards the sun.

"Keep a safe distance from the corona and photosphere," Picard intoned gravely. "We don't want to be burnt to a cinder!"

Both Riker and Data were curious to know what Picard had in mind. Riker spoke first. "Sir, this may seem a silly question, but what exactly do you intend to do?"

"Apart from the planet where you landed, Number One, this system is lifeless. The sun is a red giant, highly unstable in nature. As we don't have enough matter/antimatter to spare to ensure the incapacity of those - things - I've decided to fire the torpedo into the sun. We can warp off at the last minute, and hopefully the resultant energy release will be too much for them. Do you concur?"

"Yes, sir - it seems the most viable alternative."

Data opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again, but Picard saw him looking concerned. "Data, what is it?"

"Well, sir, I was just thinking - is it really necessary to destroy these beings?"

"Under present circumstances, Data, we have no alternative. We cannot communicate, and if they 'absorb' us, we will surely die. Do you have a viable alternative?"

"No, sir." Data shook his head.

"Anyway," Picard went on, "hopefully they won't be killed - maybe just stunned or gorged for a time, but we have to take that risk." Picard then turned to the Yeoman at the Communications console, who had been trying in vain to contact the creatures on every known frequency for the last hour. "Yeoman, send a subspace message to Starfleet, containing all my recent log entries. If we don't get out of this I want Starfleet to know what happened and to quarantine this system in future. Understood?"

"Yes, sir." The Yeoman turned to her communications board and began transmitting.

The bridge was silent, the crew tense but alert. All they could do now was wait.

.

Twenty five minutes later, La Forge came on the intercom.
 "Engineering here, sir."

"Yes, La Forge - report."

"We have a photon torpedo ready with the matter/antimatter fusion device built in; I've given it a seven minute delay fuse to allow us some extra time to get away, and I've given it a double heat resistant shell to withstand the pressures and temperatures as it passes into the sun's corona."

"Excellent, Chief Engineer. How are the warp engines coping?"

"We should have warp power in five minutes sir. I've pared all defence/life support systems back to the bone, and put some extra teams on the power supply to the warp engines - they should be up and running momentarily."

"Good, let me know when they're ready to go. Meanwhile, get that torpedo ready for launching - we can't waste any time. Picard out."

He knew La Forge had put all available power and men on the warp engines - the Engineering section was packed with technicians, scientists and Engineering personnel - and the rest of the ship seemed empty, except the bridge. They had been on emergency lighting now for fifteen minutes, and the air was being heated and recycled by the emergency back up systems.

"Mr. Crusher, status report on our position, and the creatures in relation to us?" Picard demanded.

"We are in close synchronous orbit around the sun, sir, as close as we dare go with limited deflector and shield power. The creatures are about 1,000 kilometres away, matching our course and speed."

They're stalking us, Picard thought, like a lion stalks its prey, matching its speed and maintaining its distance until it runs in for the kill. Picard didn't like the analogy, and quickly put it from his mind.

La Forge was soon back in touch. "Sir, we have minimum warp power! Ready to launch the torpedo on your order!"

"Excellent, La Forge - prepare for my signal. All hands - prepare for warp speed!"

The whole ship readied for action.

"Slow ship to minimum impulse," Picard went on. "How long before the beings catch up with us at this speed?"

"Approximately two minutes," Data intoned.

Picard hit the intercom. "La Forge! Launch the torpedo - now!"

A split second later the unmistakable trail of a photon torpedo shot out from the bow of the ship, curving downwards towards the energy mass of the red giant.

"Sir, the beings have changed direction. They are now veering

off, turning and following the torpedo!"

"Excellent, Data - they've taken the bait!"

A few seconds later, there was a brief flash as the torpedo entered the outer edge of the red giant's corona, and then it was gone.

"La Forge," Picard snapped, "begin seven-minute countdown. And get us out of here, fast as you can!"

"Aye, sir - warp one," Data responded. "Direct course away from the sun laid in. Implementing - now!"

The relativistic star field effect appeared on the main viewscreen as the Enterprise completed its right-angled turn away from the sun of the Theta Zirconis system, and shot off into space.

Data began the seven minute-countdown. Although the Enterprise was headed in the opposite direction, the main viewscreen showed a reverse view of the Red Giant, with heavy light and radiation filters on in preparation for the coming explosion. Picard gripped the arms of his chair tightly, whole body tense. Almost everybody else on the bridge was tense as well, except for Data, who continued the countdown in his calm, methodical way.

Data had just reached two minutes thirty seconds to detonation when the sun seemed to implode, and then in a brilliant flash explode outwards in less than a second.

"Emergency - secure all decks!" Picard snapped. "Deflectors and shields on maximum - prepare for shock wave turbulence!"

Everybody on the bridge seated themselves, eyes riveted on the screen as the sun went supernova. The initial shock wave hit them twenty seconds later, and the ship shook violently; fortunately, the deflectors and shields managed to absorb much of the turbulence, but the crew was still shaken up. Picard was flung out of his chair; a few seconds later, as the shock wave passed, Riker helped him back to his seat.

"Are you all right, sir?"

"Yes, thank you, Number One - slightly shaken up but nothing broken. So much for La Forge's seven-minute timer - it went faster than I imagined!"

"Yes, sir. Possibly the temperatures/pressures in the sun were too much for the shielding, or maybe the creatures 'absorbed' it, triggering it off prematurely. We'll probably never know. But at least we made it!"

"Not quite yet, Commander. Secondary shock waves and radiation front approaching - 15 seconds to impact!" Data intoned calmly.

"Prepare for further turbulence!" Picard exclaimed. "All power to the shields and deflectors!"

The bridge lights dimmed as the second shock wave hit. Although violent, it was not as bad as the initial unexpected shock wave, and this time Picard remained in his seat. As the turbulence subsided, Picard ordered, "Step down to Yellow Alert. All decks - damage teams report in. Dr. Pulaski and medical teams, be ready for

emergency cases."

The bridge was swamped with calls from all over the ship; although there were many broken bones and some radiation cases near the outer hull of the ship, nobody had been killed; and although several systems shipwide had been knocked out or seriously damaged by the sudden shock waves and radiation, the warp engines and life support were undamaged, and the hull integrity was still 100 percent.

"We got off quite lightly," Picard murmured to Riker. "Things could have been much worse."

"Agreed, sir," Riker replied.

Once all emergency calls had been dealt with, a rather sheepish Geordi La Forge reported to the Captain. "I'm really sorry, sir - I was sure that the torpedo would withstand the pressure/temperature effects for the full seven minutes. I accept full blame for the damage to the ship."

"Nonsense, La Forge," Picard said, calmly. "No-one can say it was your fault. We don't know what happened to the torpedo - possibly the creatures reached and absorbed it, triggering it prematurely. We'll probably never know. But don't blame yourself. If you hadn't added those two extra minutes to the timer mechanism, we might not be having this conversation at all. And the ship is still in one piece. How are the engines?"

"Thank you, sir. The engines are fine - we got some serious stress at the nacelles, but well within structural safety limits. We have some people with broken bones, cuts and contusions down here, but they're being dealt with. I'll get back to you later - La Forge out."

Picard switched off the communications channel. "Data - any sign of those creatures?"

"No, sir, but our sensors are inoperative at this time. They may have been destroyed in the initial explosion, or they could have survived - with beings beyond the known boundaries of matter, it is difficult to say. But they will not be able to reach us now."

"At least that's good to know," Picard said, with a sigh of relief. "Plot a course for Starbase 135."

"Yes, sir - course laid in and ready to implement."

"Engage."

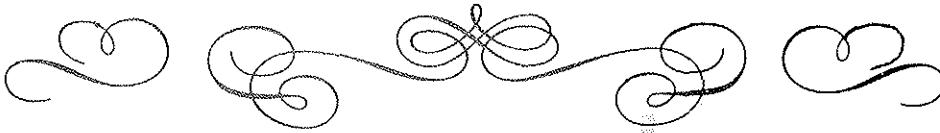
Picard took one last look at the new supernova that once was the Theta Zirconis star system. *It's so beautiful*, he thought, gazing at the dazzling rainbow hue of the multi-layered shells of gas expanding outwards from the white hot centre. Turning to Riker he said, "I hope those creatures survived, Number One, and they like their new home -", he nodded towards the main viewscreen - "because I wouldn't like to have been responsible for their deaths. It was such a pity we couldn't communicate with them!"

"Agreed, sir," Riker answered, smiling and nodding at the same time. "I'm sure they have survived: and maybe, in the future, we'll get the chance to meet them again - except this time it'll be on our terms!"

"I'm sure we will, Number One. I'm sure we will."

The Enterprise headed off to Starbase 135, leaving a new, bright light shining in a dim corner of the galaxy.

Deep in the heart of the expanding gas ball that was once Theta Zirconis, the energy beings thrived, absorbing as much of the unleashed primal power as they required. Then, joined as one, they moved outwards to seek a new home.

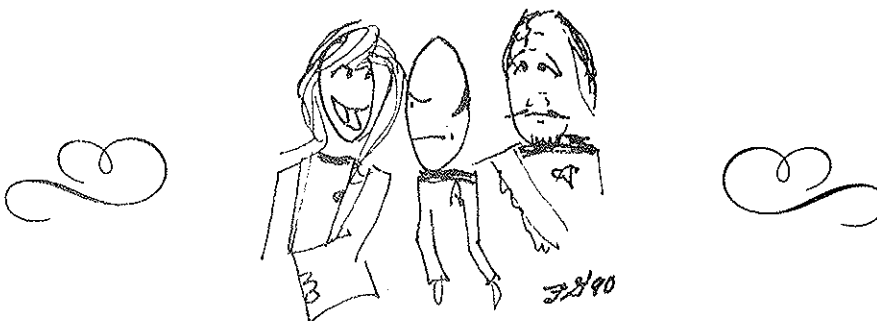


INTERSTELLAR GRAF MEN

Somewhere beyond our solar system
There is an alien ship;
Its crew is listening to the friendship messages
That Earth broadcasts into Space.
But what they enjoy most of all
Are the television and radio broadcasts;
For these mysterious aliens
Have become television and radio addicts.
They have become particularly addicted
to the soaps and game shows;

Poor things.
But these aliens are really here to work,
And, although they enjoy the broadcasts,
What they are really waiting to hear
Is when Earth is going to launch
Its next Mariner or Voyager probe;
For every time we do so,
As soon as it gets beyond Earth's detection,
These aliens go out and collect it.
Not to investigate and analyse
But to turn it into scrap!
For these mysterious aliens are
Gatherers.
Interstellar scrap men!

Christine Jones



IN THE MIND'S EYE

by

Lorraine Goodison

Captain's Log, Stardate 42264.9:

While paying a routine courtesy call to Zenaan, we have been asked to clear up a difficulty caused by a breakdown in communications. Zenaan's governing body requested Federation Security's assistance in transferring a dangerous criminal, Dern Saire, to a secure institution. Saire has apparently escaped Zenaan corrective measures twenty times and is considered too dangerous to remain on the planet. Unfortunately, the transport and escort for Saire has not arrived as arranged. Governor Onass has requested my help.

Governor Onass leaned forward, the move bringing his heavy-jowled face closer to the screen. "Captain Picard, I must insist you consider our situation. As a representative of the Federation, this is your responsibility."

Only by an effort of will did Jean-Luc Picard refrain from uttering the acid reply which sprang to mind. He really was not in the mood for petty officials who thought a starship was there at their beck and call. This was, however, a member planet. He settled for a non-committal stare. Sometimes maintaining an unperturbed front was in its own way a panacea for irritating individuals, along the lines of 'if you only knew what I really thought...'

"I understand your feelings, Governor Onass," the Captain replied smoothly, "but I am hardly responsible for the delay in picking up your prisoner, and delivering him to his destination will in turn delay this ship."

Onass flapped one hand in irritation. "I know, I know, but in the interests of Saire's getting a fair hearing, it is important to get him off Zenaan before someone tries to kill him. The situation here is quite tense, as I explained before. Starfleet has left us with this problem and I look to you to solve it."

Picard stifled a sigh and glanced over his shoulder. "Mr. Worf - your opinion?"

The Security Chief straightened proudly. "One criminal is hardly a difficulty, Captain. My team will ensure maximum containment. He will not escape us."

"Hmm." Picard returned his attention to the viewscreen. "Very well, Governor Onass, consider your problem solved. My Security Chief will contact you directly."

Onass broke into a wide toothy smile. "Thank you, Captain Picard. You have no idea how grateful I am. This Torrenian has caused us many difficulties, not to mention the lives of several Zenaanites."

"That is regrettable, but your people will soon be able to rest easy. Picard out." The viewscreen blanked and Picard looked to his Security Chief. "Make it so, Mr. Worf."

Will Riker shifted forward in his seat as Worf departed the bridge. "Seems an awful lot of fuss."

"Doesn't it. Onass was somewhat vague as to the exact nature of Saire's crimes. The term 'murder' can cover a multitude of sins, and as for their insistence on keeping him sedated..." Picard rubbed his chin, frowning at the screen. "Contact the JAG office for this sector and find out more about Dern Saire, including the reason for the mix-up."

"Aye, sir."

Feelan Duv fidgeted on his feet, staring impatiently at the Enterprise officer who carefully studied his report on Saire. He wanted to get this over with and return to his game of kuntaka, but this alien with the strange ears refused to hurry.

Lt. Selar glanced at the Zenaanite, unperturbed by his obvious wish to be elsewhere. "I do not recognise this sedative."

Feelan sighed irritably and stabbed a finger at the board. "Solandinav is our newest deep sedative. It's not my fault you Starfleet people can't keep up to date."

Selar's expression would have shattered rock. "It is hardly possible to keep track of every member planet's medical developments. That is why we requested you use a Federation-recognised sedative."

"We didn't have any," snapped Feelan. "Now will you sign the thing or not?"

"Once I have confirmed that the prisoner is indeed sedated." The Vulcan medical officer consulted her tricorder, oblivious of Feelan's irritation. After a small delay, she nodded and signed the release papers. "Everything seems to be in order."

"Glad you agree," said Feelan, unaware that sarcasm was lost on a Vulcan. He snatched back the board, looking to the other alien. "Will you sign the nerdled thing?"

Worf glared at the annoying little Zenaanite and countersigned Selar's signature. "Dern Saire is now given over to the Enterprise."

"Wonderful. Bye."

Worf's lip curled. "Your manners leave much to be desired."

"So do yours. I'm just glad to be rid of him." He matched Worf glare for glare, no mean achievement in itself, then stood back to watch the Enterprise contingent beam up.

As soon as the effect faded, Feelan reeled and shook himself, feeling as if he'd come to after a long dream. He stared at the board in his hand, shrugged, and walked off.

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Dern Saire was an imposing individual. A full two metres tall, he was as broad as he was long, his heavy musculature born of a denser gravity than Earth norm. He lay on the bunk in the holding cell like an immovable mountain, lips pulled back across yellowed teeth even in his sedated state.

Ensign Bloomsbury checked the molecular binders on Saire's wrists and ankles once more for luck before walking across to his section chief. "They're secure, sir. He won't get out of here."

Worf nodded, watching the comatose Torrenian closely. A part of him hoped he would try to escape so he, Worf, could test his strength. It would be pleasing to demonstrate his superiority against this felon. Worf left the holding cell, turning to activate the restraining field.

"Watch him closely," he told Bloomsbury. "It would not do for him to cause any trouble."

"No problem, sir," confirmed the Ensign.

"I know I can count on you."

Bloomsbury watched Worf stride away, wondering why, from Worf, such a comment should sound like a veiled threat. He sighed, remembering Tasha Yar's style of command. It had taken the Security people a while to adjust to Worf's aggressive dominance. Bloomsbury frequently thanked his stars that there weren't more Klingons in Security.

Casting one final look at Saire, Bloomsbury turned away and stood easy, unaware of Saire's eyes opening to study his surroundings.

Getting details from the Judge Advocate Office for Sector 790A would take some time. The Enterprise was on the extreme edge of the sector, and it would take at least five hours for Riker's query to arrive and be answered. The Commander had no intention of waiting around for that length of time. He left the ready room and glanced around the bridge. Everything seemed peaceful enough, so he handed over control to Data and headed for the turbolift.

For want of a better destination, Riker ordered the lift to the holding cells; he wanted to see this fearsome alien for himself. As far as they knew, Saire was wanted for murder and corruption on more planets than Zenaan. No-one was sure, however, how or why he ended up on that planet. As Saire was not a native of Zenaan, he fell under the jurisdiction of Federation law. Riker figured it was a neat way of passing the buck.

The lift arrived at Deck 13 and a short distance away were the holding cells. As Riker rounded the corner, he was surprised to see no guard outside. Surprised, and a little suspicious.

Riker cautiously approached the cell. There was no tell-tale glow from the forcefield, which told its own story. Riker quietly swore and angled in towards the door, convinced that Saire would be long gone.

He was wrong.

Saire's meaty hand clamped down on Riker's shoulder, dragging him off his feet into the cell. Riker slammed against the floor, his breath whooshing from his lungs. His feet were tangled in something. He looked - and felt sick. Ensign Bloomsbury was quite clearly, and nastily, dead.

Riker slowly looked up the full length of Dern Saire. The Torrenian smiled and reached down toward his next victim.

There was danger, and agonising pain. It reverberated in her head, screaming through her dreams and bringing her awake with heart-stopping terror.

Deanna Troi stared blindly at her darkened room, gasping with the immediacy of her dream. Some seconds elapsed before she realised it was not a nightmare, or at least not a sleeping one. Her head was full of another's emotions, his pain, anger and fear. He swamped her, shaking her body with the echoes of a desperate struggle.

Troi swung her legs over the side of her bed, stumbling as an empathic impact slammed her consciousness. She fumbled for her robe, barely aware of what she did. Her own needs were drowned by the onslaught, but she managed to force back the waves to allow rational thought some purchase.

"Com - computer - locate Commander Riker."

"Commander Riker is in Holding Cell Number One, Block C."

"Oh, Bill..." Troi's eyes closed against the pain she felt. She swayed on her feet, supporting herself against the wall. If it continued much longer, she might not be able to hold on. She gasped out a call to the Captain, who mercifully answered quickly.

"Counselor?"

"Captain - it's Bill - Commander Riker... He's being attacked in Holding Cell One. He needs help!"

In his cabin, Picard shook off the last traces of sleep. "Emergency!" he snapped as he reached for his uniform. "Security to Holding Cell One, Block C."

Riker slammed against the wall, the impact driving the breath from his lungs. He spun, kicking out, but Saire had moved, coming in from the other side to slam a clenched fist to Riker's head.

The First Officer stumbled away, desperately trying to control his body. He managed to reach for his communicator, only to remember that Saire had smashed it in their first clash.

The bunk caught the back of Riker's knee and his left leg buckled. Saire caught him before he fell, crushing cloth in his huge fist. Human and Torrenian stared at each other. Saire grinned.

He's playing with me, Riker thought even as his ambo-jitsu move failed to budge Saire's grip. *What is he - some kind of sadist?*

With a twist of the wrist and a slight grunt, Saire cast Riker aside like a rag. Riker impacted with the door edge, feeling the grate of bone on bone. The tart taste of blood spread from his bitten tongue. A backhanded slap sent him reeling and he dimly wondered how much longer he could remain conscious.

Saire reached down to grab the Human's hair. Pulling Riker up, he followed through with a punch to the stomach. Riker folded over, feeling his broken ribs grind in agonising pain. His body thudded against the uncaring floor. Saire loomed over him, casually kicking his thigh.

Gritting his teeth against the impact, Riker tried to force his body to act. He was not going to lie back and die, dammit!

Nothing responded. Blackness was creeping in at the fringe of his vision and every breath was torture. He clutched his chest, too battered and sore to do anything other than endure.

Why doesn't he finish me?

Saire was standing over him, eyes fixed on the doorway. As the sound of pounding feet came along the corridor, he chuckled, bending down to seize Riker's neck in his hand. Riker could not prevent a sobbing gasp escaping his throat, no more than he could prevent Saire holding him up like a prize chicken to exhibit before the people outside the cell.

"Let him go!"

Picard's order made no impression on Saire. "No."

Worf growled and he raised his hand phaser.

"Worf, no!" ordered Picard. "He could snap Riker's neck like a twig before the stun took effect."

"I did not intend to stun him," rumbled the Klingon menacingly, glaring at Saire. Picard threw him a warning look and he clamped down on his anger.

"Don't use the phaser!" Dr. Pulaski ordered as she joined the group. She aimed the medical tricorder at Saire's prisoner. "Commander Riker's condition could be worsened if he's caught in a stun field."

"We can't just stand here!" Worf protested, itching to rush the Torrenian.

Deanna Troi ran round the corner, completely unaware that she wore very little over her nightclothes. Her entire being was focused on Riker; his agony was hers. She pushed to the front of the group, halting at Picard's side.

"Captain... he's in tremendous pain, but he is aware of us."

Picard nodded and moved forward, aware of Worf coming in close to his shoulder. He faced the Torrenian squarely, trying not to show anxiety at the state of Will Riker. "Let the Commander go," he ordered evenly, his voice carefully controlled. "Let him go and I promise you a fair hearing."

Saire's reply was a harsh bark of laughter.

"Let him go," repeated the Captain. "You're not stupid. If he dies, you'll lose a hostage and the situation won't improve. If you release him, it will be in your favour."

Saire chose not to respond. He stood astride Bloomsbury's twisted corpse, his hand clenched round Riker's neck. There was a certain insolence in his eyes and dark menace in the look he gave Picard.

Picard tried again. "Saire, listen to me. You are not helping yourself. I don't care what your crime was, just let Riker go and we'll talk. I give you my word that my men will not fire." He gestured to the Klingon. "Lieutenant, stand back."

With great reluctance Worf obeyed, but the Security team's phasers remained readied.

"Lower your weapons," Picard ordered.

While the team did so, Pulaski consulted her tricorder. "There's internal bleeding and some damage to his kidneys."

Picard made no indication that he had heard. If anything, he was even more composed. "All right, Saire, the phasers are lowered. Now - what do you want?"

"You."

"Captain!"

The two voices, Saire's bass tone and Troi's warning cry, clashed in Picard's mind, becoming a roar which overwhelmed him. He collapsed like a puppet, his eyes rolling up into his head as he fell against Worf.

Pulaski made a grab for Troi, who'd keeled over at the same time. She managed to catch the Betazoid's arm, but found herself carrying Troi's entire weight.

"Doctor, what happened?" Worf questioned as he supported Picard's unconscious form.

"I don't know," Pulaski answered and her gaze moved to Saire. "But I bet he does."

Saire smirked.

"What the devil..." Jean-Luc Picard stared at his surroundings, distorted by the sudden shift of scene. One moment he was outside the holding cell, the next - where?

He stood on a shifting landscape of purple and red which stretched into infinity on every side. Above his head an oppressive blood-red sky moved sluggishly, making him feel slightly nauseous. There was a foulness to the place, a feeling of evil he could almost taste.

At his feet lay a woman - Deanna Troi. He moved to help her up, feeling a tremor run through her body as he did so. "Counselor - are you all right?"

Troi nodded, swallowing the bile which had risen in her throat. She breathed deeply to counteract the effects of the mind-shift which had brought her here. It took her some seconds to adjust to the situation, then she touched Picard's arm. "This is a mind-scape," she said softly. "He's taken us into his mind."

"Saire? How? There was no mention of telepathic abilities."

"Nevertheless, that is where we are - " Troi broke off as her empathy settled down enough to reveal to her a familiar presence. "Bill... "

They ran to where Riker lay some distance away, drawn into a protective curl. Troi knelt by his head, reaching out to him with hand and heart. "Bill... it's Deanna."

He stirred, unclenching one fist to take her hand. "Deanna? How did you get here?"

She looked to the Captain to answer.

"A good question, Number One," Picard said gently. "I don't suppose you have any theories on how to get back?"

Riker stared up at his Captain, clearly unsure if he was real or not. "This is crazy... You can't be here."

"We are," Troi assured him. She gripped his hand tightly, reaching out to smooth his hair. Believe me, Imzadi, she sent. Saire has drawn us into his mind also.

Picard hunkered down by Riker's side. "Number One, how long have you been here? What happened?"

"I... don't know. I was being beaten - tried to escape and couldn't. I saw you arrive and then - I woke up here." He stirred, raising his head to gaze at the unfriendly surroundings. "If I am awake... This is like a nightmare."

A laugh followed on the tail of his remark, echoing across the sky, triggering a rumble of thunder. Picard straightened up, scanning the empty mind-scape. "Show yourself!" he demanded. "Or are you too cowardly to do so?"

Another laugh, then Saire flickered into existence, watching them with obvious pleasure. "The gnat bites," he mocked. "Don't bite too hard, gnat, you might irritate me."

Picard stood his ground. "I've never been impressed by amateur dramatics. Why have you brought us here?"

"Because I wished to."

"That's no answer."

"It's all you'll get."

The ground shifted, sending Picard stumbling sideways. Riker moaned.

"I can do anything I want," Saire informed them with deadly calm. "This is my creation, my domain. You had better remember that."

A chasm suddenly gaped at Picard's feet, the ground dropping hundreds of metres into molten lava. The Captain of the Enterprise quickly stepped back from the edge, anger lending fire to his voice. "You have no reason to do this! I won't be forced into anything by your empty threats! I demand you release us."

Saire faced him calmly. "What makes you think I want anything from you?" he enquired mildly. "Perhaps I only want your company." With that ominous comment, he disappeared from view.

Pulaski caught Worf's arm as he raised his phaser. "Worf, no! I don't know what that'll do to Commander Riker."

"Then what can we do, Doctor?" demanded the Security Chief, indicating Picard and Troi.

"I don't know that either." Pulaski bit back her frustration and consulted the tricorder. No change in the readings. "They're unconscious, but there's more brain activity than there should be in that state." She cast a look at Saire. "Just like him; he's focused inwards."

"All the more reason to stun him now," Worf stated firmly.

Saire's eyes flew open. "And how will you save them then?" he asked, smiling at their discomfort. "I won't lose my grip if I'm stunned."

"We've only got your word for that," snapped Pulaski.

The menacing threat was once more in Saire's eyes. "Then be careful what you do. Harm me, and you harm them."

"What do you want, Torrenian?"

Saire met Worf's demand with thinly-veiled contempt. "Something."

"His attention is elsewhere," Troi announced suddenly, disturbing Picard's thoughts. "He is speaking to the others."

Picard studied her with interest. "Can you sense what he's saying? Perhaps get a message to them?"

She shook her head. "No. He is very controlled. I can't breach his barriers."

"Then how do we get out of this? He must be exerting some effort to hold us here."

"Yes, but I feel he has some expertise in this, perhaps years of manipulating the minds of others. His mind is powerful and his control precise." Troi paused, her dark eyes conveying her concern. "Captain, the only way to fight him is with your mind, on his terms. What we see here is his construct. In the mind, thoughts become reality. The greater will survives."

"I see... "

"It's like Armus all over again," Riker muttered thickly, sharply reminded of the evil encounter some months ago. Instantly, as if his words and memory had triggered a response, he found himself once more being dragged back toward an unknown fate. This time he knew what would happen and panic lit his eyes. He could not undergo that again, that feeling of cloying darkness clogging every pore until he was part of the creature and losing his identity. "No..."

The Captain had seized Riker's arms, leaning back with all his strength to combat the pull. "He's taken this from your mind. Armus was left behind on Vagra II - it can't possibly be here. Remember that, Will!"

Riker listened, let the knowledge combat the fear which ate at his strength.

Armus is not here. I won't be dragged into it again. It's illusion - Saire's doing. Armus does not exist in this place.

The force pulling him back just as suddenly ended, causing Picard to fall back into the sandy soil. At the same instant, Saire re-appeared, standing over them, arms folded in quiet satisfaction.

"Enjoying your stay?" he enquired pleasantly.

"No we are not!" snapped Picard, dusting himself as he stood up. "If you have no purpose for holding us here other than your own amusement, then let us go. If there is another purpose, then tell me and cease this pointless posturing."

Saire flicked a hand in the Captain's direction. "Shut up."

Picard went flying, spinning helplessly until he landed in a heap a distance away. Saire immediately turned his attention to the woman watching him in silence.

"I've had empathes before," he gloated. "They are... stimulating."

Troi gasped as his mind overwhelmed hers, coating her id in vile suggestions and harsh carnality. She twisted in agony, feeling a part of her mind respond eagerly to his dark caresses.

"No you don't, you bastard..." rasped Riker, pulling himself out of his stupor to kneel weakly at her side. He grasped her shoulders, feeling her violent trembling. "Deanna, fight him. Push him back."

Saire was in her, foul and choking, skittering through her mind like ants in a nest, carelessly turning her sensitive responses into obscene lusts she never imagined could exist. She sobbed, scrambling back from his loathsome advance, lost in her own mind.

Deanna, I'm here. Imzadi, you're safe. There was a light, a comforting glow which fought past the darkness to touch her and lend her strength. She clung to it, allowing Will's spirit to fuel hers. With his strength came another's, a diffident gentle touch which tried not to intrude too much.

Jean-Luc. Bill. Thank you...

Together they beat back Saire's grip until Deanna was back as

she'd been, held in Will's embrace and supported by Jean-Luc's presence.

The Captain was furious. "There was no need for that!"

Saire grinned wolfishly. "Oh, there was need. Didn't you feel her need? There's enough there for us all."

"That's enough!" shouted Riker. "Either you end your game or let us go. We're not toys for you to play with."

The Torrenian regarded him closely, seeming to consider his words. He began to laugh, deeply rumbling laughter which crashed like thunder about them. The plain beneath their feet became as pliable as water, undulating in waves of soil. Any attempt to regain steady footing failed as the substance eddied and heaved with irregular lurches. A huge wave of rock suddenly tore itself from the depths, surging forward to push Riker before it.

Troi threw himself towards him. "No! We must not be separated!"

Once more Picard made a grab for Riker's arms, just managing to drag him back before the wave carried him further into Saire's mind. A wind whipped up around them, lashing their skin with stinging shale.

Troi clung to Picard's arms, her nails digging into his skin. "If we're separated, we lose any chance we have!"

"Then we'll have to hold on."

Picard's firm declaration was whipped away by the wind, but Troi sensed his intent and linked her arm in his, closing her eyes against the soil battering her face.

Saire opened his eyes, staring directly at the Klingon who stood close by, phaser at the ready. "Boo!"

Worf bared his teeth, but could do little else. "Let Commander Riker go," he growled.

The Torrenian regarded him quizzically. "Is that all you want? How tame." He opened his hand, carelessly allowing Riker to crash to the floor. "I have his mind. I don't need his body any more."

"Saire - wait!" cried Pulaski. "What are you - "

He was gone, his attention inward-seeking. The doctor swore, earning an appraising look from Worf. "I get frustrated too, Mr. Worf," Pulaski sighed. "Especially when I don't know what's going on." As she spoke she hurried to Riker's side, consulting the tricorder. "We'll need a spinal blanket, Williams," she said to the nurse close behind her.

Williams deftly placed a thin sheeting under Will Riker's limp body and keyed in an instruction which started the blanket moulding itself to the exact contours of Riker's spine. Thus immobilised, they were able to move him safely to sickbay. They were barely there when a nurse called from the beds where Picard and Troi lay.

"Doctor, the Captain's life signs are erratic. You'd better get over here."

Pulaski hurried across.

Like Troi before him, Picard was drowning, but this was more in keeping with the word's accepted definition. The ground beneath him had suddenly melted, plunging him into a dense mass which smelt and tasted like blood.

He went under the surface, struggled back up with the aid of Troi's hold on his arm. Her touch loosened, left him gasping and without support. There was no purchase, nothing to hold. He couldn't breathe...

"Captain! Reach for my hand!"

Straining against the insidious pull of some force below, Picard threw all his strength into obeying the order. Riker's hand was close, so close. Just - one - more - effort -

The blood closed over his head.

"No!" Will's agonised shout added to the pressure against Deanna's empathic barriers. The fear of both men swamped her, heightening her own, and she had to force herself to keep hold of Will's arm to provide an anchor for him.

Riker lunged at Picard's hand as it slipped from his grasp. He caught the lean wrist, clamping his fingers round it in a crushing grip. For a moment, the force exerted by either side was equal, until with agonising slowness, the murk began to give up its prey.

Picard found himself pulled free of the blood. He lay heaving for breath, too shocked and exhausted to move or speak. The viscous liquid clung to him, its harsh metallic taste overwhelming his senses. His body rebelled against the substance and expelled it violently. The resulting bout of vomiting made his head swim from lack of oxygen and he felt himself sinking into a darkness he knew could be lethal.

Only by an extreme effort did Picard manage to push himself up to meet the anxious gaze of his companions. He shrugged off Troi's touch.

"I'll live," he croaked, setting off a bout of coughing.

The readings settled as mysteriously as they had begun fluctuating, refusing to reveal the reason to Dr. Pulaski. She lowered the drug she had been about to administer, her lips set in a thin line. She leaned over Picard, resisting the urge to shake him or at least slap his face.

"Captain Picard. Can you hear me? Are you aware at all? Captain!"

There was no response and Pulaski heaved an irritated sigh. She looked up, straight into Lt. Selar's steady gaze.

"I know," the CMO said. "It's not medically correct procedure, but I don't know what else to do, Lieutenant."

"I did not imply criticism..."

Pulaski nodded distractedly, her gaze returning to Picard. She raised one hand in mute expression. "It's just... so damned frustrating! I'm responsible for the health of the Captain, and all I can do is stand here and watch."

Selar straightened. "Commander Riker is ready for surgery."

"Good." Pulaski gave Picard one last searching look before turning her attention to the most immediate problem. "I may not be able to do much for the Captain or Counselor Troi, but at least I can deal with Commander Riker's injuries. Let's get to it."

Satisfied that, for the moment, things were back on an even keel, Riker surveyed the quietened scape about them. "No sign of Saire."

"He evidently doesn't need to be here in person," Picard murmured, wishing he could rid himself of the awful taste. "Pity - I'd sort of hoped we could use that against him."

"Do you suppose this is why the Zenaanites were so determined to get rid of him?" Troi asked, shivering at the thought of others trapped in Saire's mind. She could not sense him, but that did not mean he was not watching and waiting.

"Undoubtedly," replied Picard. His expression hardened into one of uncompromising determination. "But we're not going to be his next victims."

"No." Riker drew on the strength of Picard's conviction, using the thought to conquer the growing unease within him. It was weird - here he was in someone's mind, while his body lay battered and unconscious in an unattainable limbo. The thought was disorientating and difficult to comprehend.

Caught in his musings, Riker came to with a start, aware that Troi was voicing a theory about Saire.

"... doubt if he has often taken more than one psyche before. I was drawn in by my empathic rapport - I couldn't break free of Bill's pain. I believe he is testing our strength, finding our weaknesses. If he can separate us, his task is made easier, and - "

"He can torture us indefinitely," ended Riker, his voice fainter than he intended.

He was aware of them staring at him, but their voices were distant and garbled. There seemed to be a mist between them, rolling in to damp his responses. He was slipping towards oblivion and it would be so easy just... to... close... his... eyes...

Lt. Selar glanced at the readings, registering their information and reporting it to Dr. Pulaski. "The sedative is taking effect."

Pulaski nodded. "We'll have to replace one kidney. At least his lung is still inflating - that bone sliver is too close. We got him just in time. Give me - What's wrong?"

The Vulcan medic was staring at the readings with untypical amazement. "The sedation - he seems to be fighting it."

"That's impossible," Pulaski snapped. Her frown deepened when she saw the readings. "I don't believe it..."

"Something's... happening..." Riker struggled to stay 'awake', somehow aware that he should not succumb. Deanna was close by, her love for him written clear on her face. He reached to touch her cheek and his hand passed through her. It was so hard to concentrate.

"They must have sedated him," Deanna was saying. "I can feel him sliding away."

"He mustn't." Picard knelt, holding Riker's straying attention with his direct gaze. "Number One, you must not slip into deep unconsciousness. If you do, Saire will have won - we'll be separated and he'll be free to do just what he wants to you without resistance. Do you understand? Only by staying with us can you escape."

Riker nodded slowly, each movement agonisingly draining. "I'm trying..." He knew the Captain was grasping his upper arms but he felt nothing. It was ridiculous. How could he fade away, how could he even feel? His body was hurt, he was tired. The whole thing was crazy. He felt laughter bubbling up inside and vaguely supposed it was hysteria.

"Damn," Picard quietly swore as his fingers sank through the First Officer's skin. "We've got to bring him back. Counselor, concentrate on that thought."

She cast him a look which revealed her reluctance but she did as requested, channelling all her willpower into holding Will's retreating consciousness.

Picard stared briefly at her before adding his strong determination to the tug of minds.

"This is getting crazy..." Pulaski glared at the readings as if they were a personal affront.

"Shall I administer another 10 ccs?" Selar enquired.

The Doctor shook her head. "No. Call it gut instinct, but I've got a feeling he's fighting it for a reason." She glanced from Will Riker's pale, bruised face to her other patients. "Check their brain activity patterns." As Selar moved to do so, Pulaski tapped her communicator. "Lt. Worf, what's Saire doing?"

"Still standing there, Doctor," replied the Security Chief with a trace of disgust in his voice.

"Wonderful. Well, just leave him be for the moment." Pulaski

sighed, wondering how she could sound as if she knew what was going on when she was as much in the dark as anyone.

She raised her head to catch Selar's eye. "Anything?"

There was a trace of puzzlement in Selar's dark gaze. "Both patients show evidence of brain activity similar to that evidenced when one is concentrating."

"They're conspiring against me..." Pulaski muttered wryly. She shook her head and reached for a hypo. "I'm giving him a little something to bring him out of the deep sedative." She watched Riker's face as she pressed the hypo to his neck. "If this does have something to do with their minds, then that ought to help. I only hope they break Saire's grip soon, or Riker won't have a body to return to."

Riker's vision cleared, confirming his suspicion that the battle had been successful and he was fully cognizant. He looked at the two people who were at this moment closer to him than anyone before them, and a rush of gratitude for their friendship made him smile widely.

"You're suspiciously happy for being brought back here," the Captain noted dryly.

"I don't like intangibles," Riker replied, knowing Deanna would feel his emotion as well as see it.

"Hmm. Well, intangible or not, that's all we have to go on," murmured Picard, rising to gaze at the silent landscape. "Why isn't Saire here..."

Troi glanced up. "He is. I can sense him watching."

"Waiting for us to make a move," commented Riker.

"Let's not disappoint him." Picard turned, knelt beside them on one knee. "As I see it, the only way to escape this is to act as one, pool our resources."

Troi nodded her agreement. "It's the only way. We must form a weapon of thought and attack Saire."

"Where?" Riker asked, puzzled. "Deanna, you're the expert here. Where do we attack Saire?"

"The mind does not possess dimensions such as distance or time. Thought is the only reality. When we attack, we shall be carried to the point of most resistance." The Betazoid paused, a worried frown creasing her smooth forehead. "Such a move carries risks. On Haven, mind duels were once commonplace. The loser's mind was shattered beyond hope of reconstruction."

"Better that than an eternity in Saire's grip," Picard answered firmly.

Troi, about to voice the dangers they faced, was forestalled by a burst of discordant laughter.

"Very good!" Saire's voice boomed. "I was beginning to get

bored with you three, but I see you have some potential after all. Let's begin!"

Instantly the three officers found themselves covered in crawling, biting insects, a living skin which enveloped them completely.

Thought is the only reality. The words swam in Picard's mind and fired his rage at Saire. He ignored the stinging insects and focused his anger on the Torrenian. There was a shudder - from himself or Saire he did not know - but when he opened his eyes the insects were gone.

Round One to us, he thought with some satisfaction.

There was no time to gloat. A great monster was birthed at their feet, shooting skywards to an impossible height, fire roaring from its four mouths while acid saliva ate holes in the red earth.

Will and Deanna moved to stand either side of Picard, each knowing that he could wield their collective power to best advantage. They chanced a quick glance between them, reaffirming the bond which had no need of physical contact.

Jean-Luc felt their strength join his, mingling to form a greater whole while retaining an essential individuality. Centering his thoughts, he lashed out at the beast, a bolt of light striking through the scaled hide.

The monster roared, reeling under another strike, and another, until it suddenly flung its heads back and screamed. Its voice echoed about them even as its body winked from existence.

Riker swayed on his feet, trying not to reveal his weariness. His reserves, sapped already by the beating and his fight against the sedative, were low. He was the weak link in their defence and Saire knew it.

No messing with mind-constructs this time. Saire threw his full force at Will Riker, blasting his mind with the force of a hurricane. It tore at the Commander, biting with terrifying ease through his defences. He could feel himself breaking up, tiny slivers of id snatched away by Saire's will-power.

The attack was suddenly held back by a wall of shimmering light which encased him in a protective shield. He took a shaky breath, his smile thanking the two instigators of the barrier.

Saire's hurricane changed direction and target, but Troi was ready for him. She furiously held back the assault, secure in herself and confident that he could not hurt her again.

Picard stood like a rock, his stern concentration centred on the maintenance of their defensive barrier.

The wind shrieked and howled, blank ink clouds tearing across an alien sky. A tongue of fire flickered from the midst of the mad billowing, ribboning like a borealis above the trio and down to lash Picard from behind.

He cried out in pain, the agony loosening his grip. Instantly, Deanna sent compassion and love to heal his wound. The barrier wavered, but held firm.

"We have to strike back."

The Captain stood as if he were on the bridge of the Enterprise, his grey/green eyes fixed on a tangible enemy instead of this morass of shifting nothingness. His grim conviction drew them together, and Riker provided the form of their weapon.

"A sword. A pure, laser-edged sword."

Something was forming on the horizon, something which very much resembled Saire, but three times the height he should be.

"How very civil of him to give us a target," Picard commented. "Let's not waste it."

A mingling began then, a willing merging of their psyches to form a cohesive whole from three distinct personalities.

Strange how complete it feels, thought Picard, and he heard Riker's hearty laughter.

It's euphoric, drifted a thought, and neither was sure which had initiated the comment.

And dangerous, cautioned Troi, but at the same time her soul sang with the delight of the meshing. It was not complete, by any means. By Betazoid standards, their link was a shadow of the total fusion possible, but she moved to preserve their personal shields and prevent an embarrassing intimacy.

Will smiled, basking in Deanna's gentle strength. There was much more to the woman than most people imagined and only in unguarded moments like this did she reveal her true nature. They shared acknowledgment of their past before gliding apart to stand secure.

Ready? Picard prompted gently, allowing himself the indulgence of responding to the giddy delight inherent in the meld before turning his thoughts to the conflict ahead.

His companions answered in the affirmative and suddenly their minds pooled together in an explosion of light which coalesced into a construct born of their spirits.

The sword was radiant, its blade a shimmering blend of rainbow hues, its pommel carved ivory. It hung before them, impossibly beautiful and deadly.

Now.

The sword flew to its target. Saire laughed once more, a laugh which broke as the blade buried itself in his chest. He stared down at them. His mouth twitched, he laughed, and a seed of doubt was born in their minds.

Saire's fingers flickered, sending three crackling bolts of dark lightning to overwhelm them, digging nightmarish claws into frighteningly fragile defences. The link was split apart.

Picard heard a cry of despair - and then there was only silence and he was alone in nightmare.

The two faces which greeted Kate Pulaski in her office wore expressions of hope mixed with concern. At least that was what she thought Worf showed. It was difficult to read him. Data, on the other hand, was an open book. She hated to disappoint them, but -

"There's no change. I don't know how to bring them out of it."

Worf's eyes narrowed and a guttural growl sounded in his throat. Data transferred his attention to Pulaski's deck comp. unaware that, in reaction and manner, he was reflecting Captain Picard's style.

"This reply to Commander Riker's enquiry came in from the JAG office for this sector ten minutes ago," he reported, tapping the console. The information came up on screen. "Apparently Dern Saire is a telepath of extraordinary ability. He is wanted on seven planets for mind-manipulation and murder."

"Why don't I find that surprising?" muttered Pulaski.

"Doctor, is there no way to break Saire's hold?" Data asked. "Perhaps with the aid of another telepath?"

For answer, Pulaski looked to her Vulcan officer. "Lieutenant, this sounds more in your line."

Lt. Selar considered the possibilities. "It would be difficult and dangerous. In order to enter Saire's mind, the telepath would be open to his influence. That is most likely how Counselor Troi was drawn in. Saire has control of three minds. We do not know his full ability; he could take over another."

Before Data could respond, the air was split by a shrill beep which took the medical officers hurrying back to their charges.

Pulaski shouldered aside the nurse assigned to Picard and Troi, staring in disbelief at the erratic readings. "Heartbeat up, brain activity sky-high..." She stared at them; Troi's eyes were squeezed shut, tears oozing from the lids, while Picard tossed restlessly, muttering under his breath. "What is Saire doing to them?"

"Doctor," Selar's voice rang across the room. "Commander Riker is coming round."

Completely disorientated, Riker stared wildly at Selar's unperturbed face which was quickly replaced by Pulaski's worried frown.

"You're okay - you're in sickbay."

"No, I'm not okay..." Riker muttered thickly. He tried to rise but found his efforts impeded by a restriction around his neck and upper back. Even so, the slight movement sent a stab of pain through his chest. He wheezed, alarmed by the lack of breath.

"Saire displaced some vertebrae in your neck, as well as reorganising some of your ribs," Pulaski informed him. "One sliver's pressing against a lung. You also need a kidney replacement. If we don't operate soon -"

"I've got to go back."

The concern in the doctor's clear eyes focused into the glimmerings of understanding as Pulaski recalled the earlier struggle. "Get back... into Saire's mind?"

Riker made an attempt at a nod. "The Captain and Troi - they're trapped. We fought him - he - " he grimaced as an injury made itself known.

Selar looked pointedly at the readings. "Further delay will create complications."

Pulaski absorbed the comment. "You heard, Commander. Your body has to be attended to."

"No! If I go under, Saire's won. I've got to link with them again."

"How?" asked the CMO, aghast. "You're no telepath."

Riker's eyes closed in frustration and he cast his mind free, trying desperately to find his way through. "Got to go back - got to..."

Pulaski stood in the middle of her domain, momentarily at a loss. "I can't treat this..."

"I may be able to help," offered Selar. "I do not know the complete situation, but I can perhaps provide a channel for Commander Riker."

Pulaski slowly nodded, aware of what the Vulcan was proposing. There was no need to point out the risks - Selar was a professional who required no reminding.

Data moved from where he'd been standing on the sidelines. "Would a distraction help you? Perhaps a slight shock would take Saire's attention away from you and Commander Riker."

"It couldn't be too severe," Pulaski snapped, too caught up in her frustration to be polite. "A violent blow could have the opposite effect."

"I will 'distract' this criminal," Worf growled, an eager light in his eyes.

"I don't think that's such a good idea..." Pulaski murmured, eyeing the Klingon.

"You would have to be careful," agreed Data. "Saire's concentration is all that requires breaking."

The humour, whether deliberate or not, was lost on Worf. He glared at his commanding officer. "I see no reason to be gentle," he rumbled. "Sir."

Data was unfazed by Worf's dominant stance. "Nevertheless, you will withhold your full strength, Lieutenant."

Worf stared at him for a moment longer, then visibly reigned in his temper. "As you wish, Commander."

Data nodded slightly and turned to Pulaski. "We will be with Saire, Doctor. Please inform me at the required moment."

"I will."

The two officers departed sickbay, leaving Pulaski with Selar, who had explained her intent to Riker and was preparing herself for her telepathic sojourn. The Vulcan looked at Pulaski, her dark eyes focused inward. "I am ready."

Pulaski watched Selar place her fingers on Riker's head in the required manner. She took a deep breath, then spoke to the open channel. "Cue distraction."

Worf was only too happy to oblige. He lifted an arm, reaching back to slap Saire's face. The Torrenian rocked on his feet, toppling back against the wall.

"I hope that was adequate," Data said quietly.

Selar's mind touch was a cool metal-grey compared to Deanna's warmth.

Riker found himself flying forward down a long tunnel towards a darkness his mind recoiled from. He briefly experienced Selar's reserved but emotive touch before she retreated, leaving him in a mindscape he knew only too well.

The purple/red plain was unchanged, but in the far distance a swirling cloud of translucent grey eddied and flowed. Riker fixed his mind on it and willed himself to travel there.

The cloud was a maelstrom of shrieking, ghostly faces forming and dissipating before his gaze. In their midst, a figure crouched on her knees, hands held over her face.

Riker reached through the horrors, ignoring their attempts to fend him off with howls and terrifying grimaces. His hand closed on Deanna's shoulder. He quickly bent and encircled her with his arms, pulling her from the cloud which dispersed in a burst of hideous wails.

Deanna trembled violently, caught in the aftermath of the cloud's influence. Will held on, feeling the tremors gradually ease as her breathing steadied. She lowered her hands, looking at him with eyes full of tears and deep anguish.

"Oh, Bill..."

She buried herself in his embrace, sobbing until there was nothing left but tattered remnants of memories too painful to endure.

"Ssh... I'm here," he whispered, hating Saire for doing this to her.

"Loneliness..." Deanna said quietly, feeling the need to tell someone. "I'd forgotten such loneliness."

"Was it so terrible?"

She turned weary eyes on him. "I was on Haven, as a child, when I found I could not link as fully as others, that I only had my limited empathic abilities to bridge the gap... My feelings were

magnified and I could not - "

Her voice cracked and Will quickly hugged her. "Don't think about it."

"It hurts me now, after so many years."

"Only if you let it."

"I know." She let him pull her up, and deep distaste was in the look she gave their surroundings. "Let's get out of here, Bill."

"As soon as we find the Captain." Riker scanned the plain, frowning at a dark storm building on the horizon. There was no sign of Picard, and the air was thickening, heavy and oppressive with the approaching storm.

"From the looks of it, Saire's going to let loose with all he's got. Data's distraction might have worked too well."

Troi was startled from her melancholy. "You spoke to them? To Data?"

"I'll explain later." Riker tore his attention from the darkening sky and grasped Troi's shoulders. "Deanna, you'll have to find him. We haven't much time."

She nodded, focusing her empathy into one tiny probe which, unhampered by personal resonances, was sent outward to search for Picard's unique presence. A few months ago she would not have been able to do so with such precision; it had taken time to filter out unwanted echoes so she could focus on the Captain's emotional state without being drawn in. Her position as his personal adviser and barometer made it imperative that she understand him on a deeper level than he even suspected. She knew he sometimes resented that understanding, just as others of the crew resented her abilities. They could not know that she spent most of her time holding off their presences. Only Will slipped past her barriers, and after their previous closeness, she allowed herself that luxury.

The open-ended link suddenly pulsed, fastening onto a troubled mind full of despair. "I've found him."

As before, thought became actuality. Together they transferred to Picard's side, moving through the thick air with some difficulty. It was getting hard to concentrate.

Picard did not acknowledge their presence, did not even see them, caught as he was in his own private hell. Troi knelt before him and read the bone-deep despair in unseeing eyes.

The empath met Riker's worried eyes. "I don't know if I can reach him in time. He's closed himself off."

Riker joined her, resting his hand on Picard's shoulder. The Captain's face was haunted, as if a thousand unwanted memories had come together and settled within to fester and grow.

Riker swallowed, facing Picard squarely. "Captain... Jean-Luc. Whatever's happening is not real. It's Saire's doing. He created what you're seeing and feeling. He's deceiving you and we need your help to get back to where we belong."

There was no response. Riker tried again. "Captain, listen to me. It's Will Riker. Listen to me, not Saire's lies."

This time there was a change. Picard blinked, seeming to notice then for the first time. The despair remained, however, lacing the Captain's mellow voice. "Not lies, Will... it's the truth, and that's what makes it so potent. I was a fool. It's over."

"What?" demanded the First Officer, but Picard was withdrawing again and Riker had to shake him roughly. "Don't retreat! Fight it! Whether it's true or not, you have to put it aside or Saire will win. Do you want that to happen?"

There was far too long a pause, and Riker stared anxiously at the man while Troi waited, resonating with Picard's pain.

Finally, Picard said softly, "No."

"Then put the pain aside," Riker told him firmly. "Just as you've done before. We're going home."

Something more familiar entered Picard's eyes and he straightened. "Sounds like a good idea."

A broad smile lit Riker's features. "Feel like forging a sword, Captain?"

"Why not?" The words were jaunty, but the tone was brittle. Riker exchanged a worried glance with Troi; what could have affected him so?

Troi had no answer. She would not probe that pain unless requested, and Picard was erecting a wall between it and her; a wall of smouldering anger she had no doubt would be directed at Saire.

By the time the storm crackled and thundered its full strength about their heads, the trio was prepared. They defied the storm, taking courage from the knowledge that Saire had thrown his worst at them and they had survived.

Picard faced the roaring tempest, controlled rage lighting his eyes. "Right," he said with deceptive calm. "Let's bring the pretty bastard to us."

Raising his chin, he shouted his demand into the churning thunderheads.

"Saire! You've plagued us long enough! All you've proven is that you're a petty coward without the courage to face us fairly. We've had enough of your party games. Show yourself!"

The Torrenian complied, once more appearing as a towering giant. The sword was gone from his chest, but a rent was torn there, evidence of some measure of success. This time he would be given no chance to react.

Picard sent a mind sword whistling through the storm to replace its predecessor. He twisted it, fuelling it with all the fury he possessed.

In the same instant, Troi's sword struck from behind, thudding into Saire's head. With it came her compassion, her love, her

strong gentleness.

Saire shrieked, sent black lightning to split them apart.

His attack met Riker's defence, spending itself harmlessly on solid barriers of light. The lightning intensified but Riker's construct rode the storm.

With Saire's attention divided, Picard and Troi were free to push their dual weapons into the Torrenian's psyche. With relentless determination they poured their strength into his id, fracturing it asunder. The lightning faltered, shooting into the clouds, and Riker added his mind to the attack.

The end came quickly.

Saire's image fragmented, cracking under the triple assault. He cried out, raising monstrous hands to fend off the attack. A shrieking wail funneled past them, picking up splinters of id as it dispersed across the shifting mindscape. The giant image collapsed into a formless mass, exploding into black light which sent the three captives tumbling into numbing darkness.

Kate Pulaski blinked at the unexpected news which came over her comm channel. "Say that again, Mr. Data?"

"Saire has collapsed, Doctor. He... keeled over, crumpled, gave way, toppled. We have him restrained and sedated."

"Good..." Pulaski replied absently, looking to her three patients, who were showing signs of coming round. "I think it's over, Mr. Data, whatever 'it' was."

"Then your patients are awakening?"

"Got it."

"I will be there directly. I am intrigued to know what happened. Data out."

"You'll have to wait for the whole story..." Pulaski murmured to herself as she approached Picard's bedside. She put on a bright smile and chirpily welcomed him back to the land of the living. "You had us worried there."

Picard went to raise his head and found it had become a ton weight. "This is worse than the damned headache the Ferengi gave me," he groaned.

"I'll have to take your word on that." Pulaski deftly applied a light sedative before he could protest, then did the same for Deanna Troi. Once done, the Doctor spared Picard a curious glance. "I'm keen to find out what went on, but explanations will have to wait. Commander Riker has waited long enough for treatment."

Picard let her have it her way. His head hurt too much to allow him anything more than a sense of relief that he was back where he belonged. As he drifted off into sleep, however, he could not quash a doubt that perhaps this was one of Saire's ploys. On the heels of the thought came the sound of Data's querying voice, so Picard concluded that he was being overly paranoid. Unless, of

course, Saire had concocted a nightmare involving multiple queries from the curious android. It was a chilling thought...

Deanna Troi breathed deeply, allowing the emotions of those around her to surge over her like an ocean washing familiar shores. It was so good to relax, to know they were safe. She could feel Picard's presence; he was tired, but stable. Riker was slipping away from her into drug-induced peace. She sent him a pulse of love to seep into his mind while he slept.

Aware of her own need for rest, she made one last search for Saire. There was nothing save for a tiny voice which ached with sorrow. Troi shut it away, concentrating on the needs of the moment. She would have to arrange psych tests for them all, of course. Saire's attack might have done irreparable damage.

With that thought she succumbed to the sedative and allowed sleep to ease her bruised mind.

Commander William Riker lay awake for at least fifteen minutes, simply savouring the delight in realising he was alive and safe. He gazed at the ceiling, letting his body come to with gentle acceptance. He knew Deanna was there, and was not surprised when her exotic features came into view.

"Hi."

"Hello. How are you feeling?"

"I'll let you know when I try to move," he grinned. "Did we get rid of tall, dark and gruesome?"

Troi nodded. "He has totally withdrawn. In fact, he is close to catatonic."

Riker grimaced. "Couldn't take the pressure," he joked.

"Perhaps," Troi evaded, trying not to feel guilty about the Torrenian's shattered mind. He had tried to destroy them, and had succeeded with countless others. She should feel joy at his reward, not sorrow.

"How are you now?"

"I'm still a little shaken, but otherwise - fine." One slender finger poked Riker's shoulder. "Once you're out of here, I want you to undergo psyche-treatment."

"Damn, you discovered my secret."

"What?"

"I'm crazy."

Troi's clear laughter rang out. "I always suspected as much."

He rolled his eyes and pulled a face before returning to more serious matters. "How's Picard?"

She paused, considering her answer. "He's fine too," she replied with a smile. "No ill effects."

"Good." Riker's smile echoed Troi's. "I'll have to thank Lt. Selar."

"Later." She reached out to pat his hand. "Right now, concentrate on getting better."

"Is that an order, Counselor?"

"Certainly, Commander."

Counselor Troi left the ward feeling immeasurably better in herself. Waiting for Riker to begin recovering from his physical injuries, she had feared his mental trauma would take a toll. Her visit had just disproved that worry. The tests would still be required, but she had every confidence that Bill would pass them, just as she and Picard had done.

Her thoughts turned to the Captain. Her statement to Riker had been truthful, but not the full truth. Her tests and her own empathy had revealed an echo of his experience in Picard's mind - evidently Saire's attack had resurrected some unwanted ghosts. She had every confidence, however, that Picard was resolving the conflict himself in his own way. The Captain was an extremely strong-willed man. She had no doubt he would lock those painful memories back into their box. They were part of living.

Lt. Worf was guarding Dern Saire, determined that no-one would let the Torrenian escape again. There was no clue as to why Bloomsbury had done so - only a surmise that Saire had faked his sedation and attacked the Ensign's mind when he felt secure. Now, even though Saire was sedated and restrained, Worf was taking no chances.

Troi glanced round Worf's bulk. "How is he?"

"Quiet."

The Counselor moved on to get a better look at the prisoner. He huddled on the bunk, folded in on himself like a frightened child. "Has he spoken?"

"No."

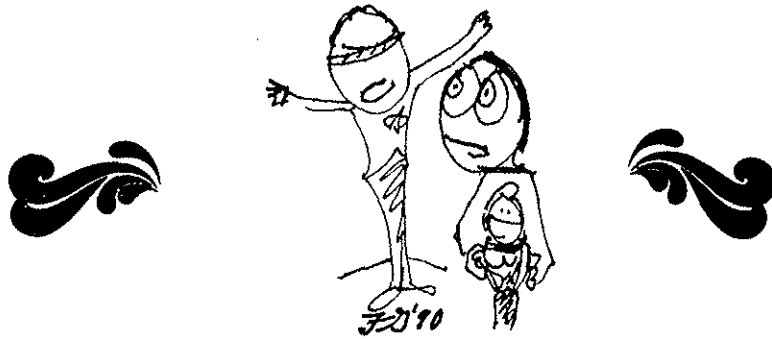
She could feel very little from Dern Saire; no anger, hate or revenge, only subdued pain and confusion. She thought of the mind duels outlawed on Haven. She had met one of the older survivors; Saire's lack of response was akin to that man's fragmented mind. The thought that it could have been her, or Bill, or Jean-Luc, made her shiver.

Still, she could not look away. Her mind returned to the instant before she blacked out; the instant when a child ran past her, crying bitterly. What had happened to make him become a tamperer of minds?

Saire lifted his head, dully regarding Troi before returning to the comfort of his arms. Pity for him welled in Deanna Troi's heart and she turned on her heel, hurrying away from the anguish.

The turbolift doors closed on the remnant of the desperate struggle, the reasons lost forever in the shattered mind of Dern

Saire.



RED ALERT

RED ALERT
The ship's in danger
I hope no-one's hurt
All hands to duty stations
RED ALERT.

MAKE IT SO
Go to warp ten.
What do you mean, No?
I gave an order
MAKE IT SO.

THE SHIP CAN'T TAKE IT!
The engines are shot.
We're not going to make it!
I'm sorry, sir -
THE SHIP CAN'T TAKE IT!

DEATH FIRST.
I'll never surrender.
Do your worst -
I'll fight to the end!
DEATH FIRST.

WE ARE ALL GOING TO DIE.
Die, expire, perish, demise, depart.
Is Wesley going to cry?
Cry, sob, weep, wail, bawl -
WE ARE ALL GOING TO DIE.

I'M TOO YOUNG TO DIE
Captain get us out of this!
I will not cry
Captain, do something!
I'M TOO YOUNG TO DIE.

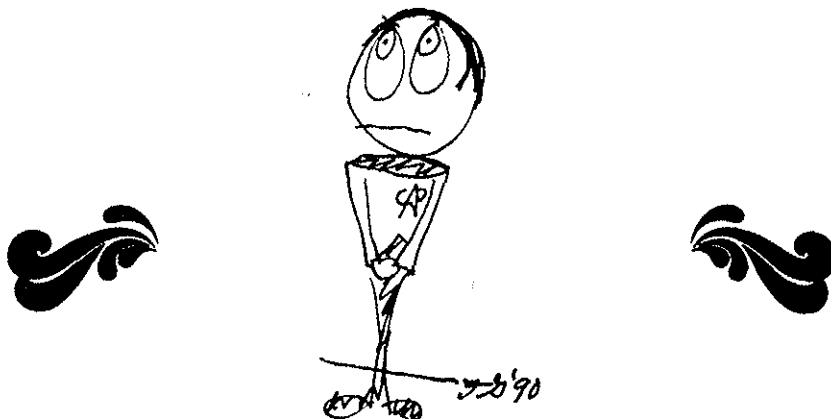
MY BEARD IS ITCHING
I wish it would stop.
The ship is pitching -
Oh, why doesn't it quit?
MY BEARD IS ITCHING.

DAMN ALL MACHINES!
I hate them all.
That's what Data means;
He says I'm antitechnical.
DAMN ALL MACHINES!

I FEEL THEIR FEAR
Closing in on me,
Their emotions so clear.
Panic is setting in;
I FEEL THEIR FEAR.

WE'RE ALL STILL ALIVE!
The ship's out of danger.
How did we survive?
I don't know quite how...
WE'RE ALL STILL ALIVE!

Lori Scott



FIGHTING CHANCE

by

Mary S Lee

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh! I'm dead - I'm dying! Aaaaaah!" wailed O'Brien, falling dramatically on the sand at the bottom of the cliff. He sneaked a look at the shoreline, but there still were not any mermaids. He would have to have another go at the program - mermaids, he felt, would add to the experience.

From behind a crag, Riker stepped forward with a flourish and looked at his friend. "It's lack of practice, O'Brien. You should keep yourself in better shape."

"That's easy to say. Every time you go dashing about, sightseeing around the galaxy, I'm just left to beam you up and down." The transporter chief stood up slowly and dusted himself down. "It's lack of opportunity, that's what," he muttered, following Riker out of the holodeck. However O'Brien was not one to hold a grudge, and he was already happily contemplating a drink to round the evening off, when Riker's communicator beeped gently.

"Commander Riker to the briefing room," it ordered.

"On my way - " and Riker was disappearing into the turbolift.

O'Brien shook his head. "It isn't fair," he offered finally, but Riker was gone.

Captain Picard turned towards the door as Riker walked into the briefing room. "Sit down, Number One."

Riker took a seat beside Data; he was surprised at how grim Picard appeared. Counselor Troi was also sombre, but that might be partly a sympathetic response to the Captain's mood. Dr. Crusher and Worf looked as much in the dark as Riker was. He began to feel worried. Picard normally radiated confidence. This evening the Captain was definitely not a happy man.

The doors sighed open and Geordi La Forge hurried in. "Sorry about the delay. I was trying out the new hangball."

The Captain nodded at La Forge and began, "I assume you are all familiar with the Silian Net."

"Yes - the energy fields surrounding the Silian systems, hypothesised to be a defence against intruders. It was discovered thirty eight years ago, when the USS Discovery was lost with twelve crew aboard. I believe - "

"Thank you, Mr. Data. Four years ago, the Federation escorted eight eminent scientists and archaeologists to Silia 4H. The Net, as its name suggests, had holes, and they were able to navigate through these to the planet. For the past few years they have been

digging amongst the ruins, and trying to uncover the principles the Silians used."

"The 4H particle generator," interrupted La Forge. "I've been reading about it. They don't understand how it works, but it promises to revolutionise sub-atomic physics."

"Indeed. You are quite correct, Mr. La Forge. In four years they have made discoveries of incalculable value. Unfortunately, the Net has tightened around them. Two months ago they found that the energy fields were growing explosively. They had no ship, but they launched all their message drones through the remaining holes. One drone was intercepted by a civilian ship three weeks ago. The physicist on Silia 4H, Professor Elizabeth Howe, estimated that they had between ten and eleven weeks before the Net reached them. Communications between the energy fields themselves have never been successful." Picard paused, and surveyed the others before continuing. "The scientists were determined to salvage as much information as possible. They planned to spend those last weeks isolating the most important finds. The Federation estimates that the material involved would advance some branches of physics and biology by upwards of fifty years. They are urgently requesting volunteers to attempt to penetrate the Net, and retrieve the scientists and their collections." Picard was silent for a full minute. No one interrupted him. "We are the only Starfleet ship within reach. You should be aware that I have valued each of you as friends, and respected you as professionals. Whatever you choose to do, I shall continue to do so. However, I am asking you to consider accompanying me on this mission. "His words echoed around the room.

Riker spoke up first, "I am ready to go, Captain." The others offered likewise in short order, but only Worf smiled. It was not a comfortable expression on the Klingon's face.

He bared his teeth and said, "Life is as death without a fighting chance of battle, as Klingons say."

Picard smiled, and some of the grimness left his eyes. "I should prefer a fighting chance IN battle, Worf, but I thank you all. We are on course for the Silian systems and are due to arrive in eight days. Once there we will separate the battle hull from the saucer section of the Enterprise, and continue on with a minimal crew. For tonight, get some rest - that's an order. Tomorrow we will review our options."

Picard was feeling guilty. He knew on one level that he had not compelled the others into accepting, but he had also known all along that they would come with him. Loyalty was a double-edged sword. He sat down at the desk in his room and accessed the files on the Silian Net once more. It was not that he objected to taking risks; he could not have reached his position if he had been a coward. Nonetheless the assignment felt like a suicide mission. None of the unfortunate vessels that had ventured into the Net itself had ever emerged, nor any of the unmanned probes. None of them had even been able to send a message explaining the situation. Yet despite that the Federation was prepared to risk the Enterprise and some of their most competent officers. Picard sighed; he was getting nowhere, but he could not sleep in this mood.

The door chimed, and Picard tried to shake himself out of it, "Come in."

It was Counselor Troi; she looked concerned. "Captain, I do not wish to intrude, but your distress is communicating itself to all of us." She paused, but Picard said nothing. "Captain, it is not your own safety that is troubling you, and it is not your fault that this has happened. We too accepted the risk when we joined Starfleet. While you were talking I sensed fear, yes, but deep commitment."

"You are correct, Counselor," Picard said, "and I know I should not be so preoccupied, but I keep feeling it is my responsibility."

"I have great trust in you. We all do. But it is not possible for you to guarantee our safety. Each day this ship is at risk, and under your command. This time the risk will be great, but your decision is still the right one." She hesitated again. "I also feel that you are tired, Captain. I am about to eat and you are welcome to share my meal - or perhaps the doctor would appreciate your company."

Picard smiled at her. "Thank you, Deanna. I'm - Come in," as the door chimed again.

Unobtrusively Troi slipped outside as the door opened. Dr. Crusher walked in and stared pointedly at the computer on Picard's desk. "Still working, Jean-Luc? I had thought you might like to come and hear Data's latest musical endeavours."

"How could I miss such an opportunity? Lead on, Doctor."

Next day the atmosphere in the briefing room was determinedly efficient. Early on Captain Picard broached the issue of crew. "I had hoped that we might not need to ask anyone else to accompany us. Any comments?"

"Perhaps Mr. O'Brien should be included. Assuming we reach Silia 4H, he would be the best qualified to organise the transfer of the scientists and their artifacts to the ship," suggested Riker.

"I agree with the Commander," Worf said.

La Forge shuffled awkwardly in his chair. "Captain, are you sure that YOU need to go?"

"Isn't that Number One's line?" Picard asked. "When I received the Federation request, I did consider remaining behind. I also thought of leaving Mr. Riker in charge of the Enterprise. However the wording of the request made it quite clear that the highest priority is attached to this mission. In view of that fact, I believe that all the people in this room should be included. Any other remarks?" Picard waited. "Very well, I shall speak to Mr. O'Brien directly after this meeting. I have decided to place Mr. Argyle in charge of the Enterprise. He will remain at a safe distance from the Net for one week. If we have not returned in that time, he will proceed to Starbase 12."

The meeting ended shortly afterwards. They were unable to make much progress on how best to penetrate the Net, and they wanted O'Brien to be present for the full discussion of the transfer operation itself. Data had noticed that no miniature probes had been sent into the Net, and he and La Forge were eager to engineer a few special designs. They were also hopeful that these could

provide a communications channel back to the Enterprise.

Riker stopped Picard as he was about to leave the room.
"Captain, could I speak to Mr. O'Brien first?"

"Feeling guilty, Will?"

"More miserable than guilty, sir. O'Brien is a good friend, and I have an unpleasant suspicion that he may regard this as a chance of adventure. I don't want him to rush into it without thinking twice."

"As you wish then. I'll join you both in a few minutes."

O'Brien was sitting on the floor with half of a transporter console around him when Riker walked in. Riker did not say anything, so O'Brien put down the unit he was fiddling with and said, "Hello there. Is this a business call or are you hiding from the Captain?"

"Business," said Riker, but did not volunteer anything else. In fact he looked positively awkward standing there.

O'Brien had seen Riker bluff his way out of positively outrageous situations during shore leave, and he did not believe that the innards of the transporter could have embarrassed his friend, so he decided to help him along. "What is it, Will? I've been promoted and you think it might rush to my head? Or you've been demoted and Picard's put me in charge of you?"

"Neither," said Riker. "I have recommended to the Captain that he asks you to come with us on the next mission."

"You don't look very happy about it. And what do you mean 'come with you'? Did you expect me to just hang around here in a pair of sunglasses, waiting for the Enterprise to return?"

"We're going to the Silian Net - through it in fact - and we're separating from the saucer section. The Captain will give you the details when he arrives. I don't want you to feel you have to accept. This won't be a simulation, and the odds aren't worth betting on."

O'Brien absorbed this news thoughtfully. "Listen, Will, I know I've jibed you about rushing off to exotic beauty spots while we mortals hang around waiting to pick up the pieces, but I don't really envy you. I've never really seen myself as the natural hero type. This is what I'm good at, and I enjoy it. However if there is a reason why you need me, then there isn't anything you can do to stop me. I've got my reasons to be grateful to the Federation, and I reckon I'd be glad to have a chance to pay some of it back. Stop looking so worried. It doesn't suit you."

Riker relaxed into a grin. "You'll have to put that back together then. It won't be much use to us if it's scattered all over the place."

Picard appeared at the door and O'Brien stood up in a hurry, just managing to catch a component that he had left balanced on the console. "At ease, Mr. O'Brien. Are you both ready?" Picard said, glancing at Riker.

Riker nodded. "Yes, sir. I'll leave you to it. Thank you, sir," and he disappeared looking embarrassed for the second time in a few minutes.

The week had passed quickly. As they approached the Net, the eight volunteers assembled on the battle bridge. Picard raised no objections. Mr. O'Brien would not be needed at the transporter for some time, even if they were successful. Mr. La Forge could monitor the engines from here, while performing his original post as navigator. The others had no reason to be elsewhere. Picard himself felt it would be appropriate that they should gather together, as a physical symbol of mutual support.

"Slowing to impulse speed now, Captain... " La Forge's fingers danced over the controls. "... And stopping. The first probes are being launched - now."

"Thank you Mr. La Forge. Tell me, what do you see out there?" Picard gestured at the screen where the corruscating energy fields of the Net were being displayed.

"I see waves of intense electromagnetic activity, high energy particles. No obvious patterns though, sir. Not enough to cause any serious problems by itself."

Picard nodded and turned round to face Wesley, who was standing beside Dr. Crusher. "Time to go now, Ensign Crusher."

"Yes, sir. Good luck," and Wesley exited smartly.

Picard did not miss the look of pride mingled with surprise on Dr. Crusher's face. She was still occasionally startled by how much her son had matured during her year as Surgeon-General.

"Captain, the first probes are returning," Data said. He sounded disappointed. "They have very little useful information. The energy levels are high and fluctuate apparently randomly. The sensors were overloaded after eight seconds."

"But their return confirms that we should be able to send miniature communications pods back out of the Net?" Picard asked.

"Yes sir, but the Enterprise will not be able to respond. We have not succeeded in designing sensors to operate in these conditions."

"That's all right, Mr. Data. That was more than I'd hoped for. Congratulations to you too, Mr. La Forge." Picard sat down. "Data, transfer that information across to Mr. Argyle, and Number One, commence separation."

With practiced ease, Riker led the ship through the procedure, and slowly the two sections of the Enterprise drew apart. Finally Argyle's face appeared on the screen.

"Separation completed. Look after yourselves."

"And you look after the ship. Goodbye, Captain," Picard said. "Shields up. Take us in at impulse speed, Mr. La Forge."

In silence the crew watched as the ship drew over the boundary

and entered the Net.

Riker's first impression of the Net was confused by a sharp sensation of nausea. He glanced around, but the others were either busy monitoring their instruments or watching the screen. He fought down the nausea, and tried to concentrate. Surely he was not going to panic? He did not think he was frightened, but it certainly felt hot in here. When La Forge spoke Riker was glad of the distraction.

"Captain, we're slowing down. Shall I increase the power?"

"No, that's fine, Mr. La Forge. Bring us to a stop. Data, launch the first pod back to the saucer section. Counselor, do you sense anything yet?"

"I am not sure," Troi said. "There is something, but it is not very distinct. It feels almost mechanical, perhaps not even alive. Nothing I'm familiar with, Captain."

"Captain, on the screen. I see a pattern forming now - a ring folding in on itself." Geordi La Forge wished he could show them what he saw. Words were so clumsy.

"It is trying to communicate. But it is definitely not alive. I do not understand how I am receiving it," Troi said.

Picard frowned. "Try to decipher its message, Counselor."

"I am trying. It is getting stronger... It is a challenge, Captain. It is ordering us to select a representative to fight for our passage through the Net."

Picard assessed the situation rapidly. "Try to tell it that we are deliberating."

Troi paused, concentrating hard. "It has understood. It will wait. I think it is an automatic device."

"That agrees with the most probable hypothesis about the Net," Data said. "The Net is supposed to defend against intruders into the Silian systems."

Picard nodded. "Counselor, can you get any further information from the entity?"

"I cannot reach it any more. It will not elaborate on its first message," Troi said.

"It is probable that its instructions are very simple," Data said. "That is, if the Silians regarded it as a machine. The scientists have found that the Silians had an extremely high level of technology, but that their artifacts had very limited independent actions."

"Any other thoughts or observations?" Picard asked. "Anything else out of the ordinary?"

Riker swallowed hard. "Sir, I don't think it's relevant, but I think I'm going to be sick." He swallowed again. The others were all staring at him. Dr. Crusher was waving a scanner in his general direction. O'Brien was watching wide-eyed. *Wonderful, thought Riker, here we are in the midst of a crisis, and I get to play the idiot.* Vomiting on the bridge could be hard to fit in with the

tough hero image.

Picard was not easily taken aback, but there was an awkward pause. Dr. Crusher finished her preliminary investigation, and injected Riker deftly. "He is in some distress, Jean Luc. But I can't examine him properly here. I've given him something to counter the nausea. I should prefer to give him a full examination, but under the circumstances I shall let you make the final decision."

"Thank you, Doctor." Picard paused again. Riker appeared somewhat better, but rather flushed. "Riker, are you going to be able to make it to sickbay?"

"Yes, sir." Riker looked determined. "If you order it, Captain."

"I do. Get out of here, both of you, and report any developments." Picard watched as Riker unsteadily left the bridge, with Dr. Crusher discretely following behind him. The Captain had the distinct impression that the situation was getting out of control. Mr. O'Brien's earlier look of fascinated horror had turned into straightforward concern. Even Worf looked distressed. "Data, launch a second pod summarising our situation... Is it possible that the previous vessels never received that challenge?"

Data had finished programming the pod before Picard stopped speaking. He delayed fractionally while he reviewed the records of past voyages into the Net. "Yes, Captain. Assuming the message was purely of an empathic nature, I do not believe they could have detected it. However it is possible that if we had not answered the original communication, it might have been broadcast in another form."

Picard turned back to look at Troi. "You used the word 'fight'. Did you receive any idea of what kind of contest was involved?"

"Very little. It conveyed an impression of danger, but not its nature."

Picard stood up and began to pace up and down the bridge. Worf was the obvious candidate if the fight was physical. Data had greater strength, but not the combination of experience and instinct that made the Klingon so formidable. On the other hand, if the contest was of the mental kind, then perhaps only Troi would be able to perceive the rules. Picard continued to pace. He knew he had to come to a decision. In a situation such as this the wrong choice might be disastrous, but no choice would almost certainly be worse.

"I have carried out an examination," Dr. Crusher's voice broke into the Captain's internal debate. "Riker's dominant symptoms are elevated temperature and pulse rate, combined with a returning sensation of nausea. The immediate cause of this is an unusual low-level neurological activity. Effectively, Riker's brain is encouraging these changes... If I treat the symptoms, the Commander's system tries to reproduce them."

"Conclusions, Doctor?" Picard asked.

"I suspect the Net has somehow triggered this reaction. If we leave the Net, Riker should begin to recover. Until then he is staying here, and that is not a request."

"Understood," Picard said. He returned to his chair. There was no further advantage in delaying. "Mr. Worf, I should like you to represent us."

"Certainly," Worf replied, straightening himself even further. He exuded ferocity as he added, "It will be my pleasure."

"Data, launch the third pod. Counselor, inform the entity that we have selected Mr. Worf." Picard watched Troi as she reached out with her mind. She had lost her normal composure somewhere along the way, but Picard could empathise with that.

"It has accepted, Captain. It will begin soon." Troi's words impacted across the bridge, and the others turned towards the screen.

"It's there again!" La Forge pointed frantically at the screen. "Captain, it's coming toward us."

At first Picard only saw a chaotic confusion ahead, but gradually he noticed a subtle swirling of colour in the background. He wanted to question Data, but the pattern was expanding rapidly. As he started to speak he saw it flaring across the ship. It felt as though a deep quiet washed through him, and unconsciously he closed his eyes and sank back in his chair. Perhaps there had been something he intended to do. Picard lost the thread of his thoughts, his mind wandered without focus. Notions half formed in his head and then drifted apart - maybe once there had been a different way of being, but for now he was content.

The others on the bridge each reacted in much the same way. Data swayed gracefully in his seat and ended up sprawled over the console. Worf dropped slowly to the ground and relaxed against O'Brien's legs. The others collapsed in their chairs. No one, Worf included, was aware of the moment when he disappeared from the bridge altogether.

In the auxiliary sickbay, Riker was feeling lousy. He was also frustrated. Dr. Crusher's theories were all very well, but what it amounted to was that somehow he was making himself ill. Meanwhile he might worry about what was happening on the bridge, but there was nothing he could do from here. Suddenly a bright moving pattern of colour lit up the room. Riker yelled, pain lancing through his skull, and then yelled again as Dr. Crusher descended gently on top of him, a dreamy expression on her face. He pushed the doctor away from him and rolled off the bed. *Emergency*, he instructed himself. Now what should he do? He felt for a pulse - there it was, apparently normal. He glanced at the diagnostic display beside his bed. As far as he could tell, the doctor was fine. Impatiently he signalled the battle bridge

"Riker here. Medical emergency. Dr. Crusher has collapsed."

There was no reply. Riker began to have a sinking feeling, quite unrelated to his physical condition. Quickly he tried to rouse the doctor, but had to settle for leaving her lying on the bed.

"Riker to the bridge, respond please."

Still no answer. With a groan, Riker seized the doctor's medical case and hurried to the turbolift.

Once inside the turbolift he leaned against the wall. He felt as if he was dying. He opened Dr. Crusher's case and appraised the contents. Many of them were unfamiliar to him, but he recognised several stimulants. Selecting one at random he injected it. Almost at once his head cleared. *Great, First Officer Riker comes staggering to the rescue*, he thought. He had reached the bridge.

It was a surreal sight. The crew were all smiling in their chairs, eyes closed and quite oblivious of Riker's grand entrance. Riker checked again - Worf was missing.

"Computer, summarise current status and locate Mr. Worf," he ordered.

"All systems functioning normally," the computer responded, "Lieutenant Worf is not aboard."

Riker paused in his hasty examination of La Forge. "How did Lieutenant Worf leave the ship?"

"Unknown. Lieutenant Worf has been absent for four minutes."

Riker completed his cursory check on the others. Like Dr. Crusher they appeared healthy, but unresponsive. Thoughtfully he returned to Troi. Bending over her he opened his mind as she had shown him in that far away time he tried not to remember. *Help me, Deanna. Come back to me.* There was nothing; no response. Riker felt cold inside, in sharp relief to his actual temperature. He reached over Data, and grimly prepared a message pod. After launching it, he resumed his inspection of the others. Only quarter of an hour had elapsed since the doctor's collapse, but he felt older by a year.

"Intruder alert on the bridge," the computer distracted Riker. "Intruder alert cancelled," it corrected, and William Riker watched in horror as Worf reappeared on the other side of the bridge. The Klingon Lieutenant was drenched in blood, but his face was frozen in the same inane grin that the others wore. Riker crossed the bridge in two strides, and fumbled with the medical scanner. This time the readings were critical. The Klingon had multiple lacerations and bruises, and was haemorrhaging extensively both internally and externally. Riker crudely bound up the most extensive cut across the Klingon's chest, and then dragged him into the turbolift.

It was almost more than Riker was capable of to lift Worf onto the bed. He looked down at his own hands. He was shaking. Reaching for the doctor's case again he grabbed another of the stimulants. Then with gritted teeth Riker set to work. It looked as though Worf had been savaged by an animal, but Riker had not got time to ponder over this. He attached a drip and dealt systematically with Worf's injuries. The sight of Worf's left side was too much for Riker in his present state, and he vomited on the sickbay floor.

Picard coasted back to reality gently. He felt the sides of the chair beneath him, and wondered idly where he was. With returning awareness, he snapped back into full control and sat up sharply. Around him the others were still looking somewhat dazed.

"Computer, report," he ordered.

"All systems functioning normally," it offered reassuringly.

"Where is Lieutenant Worf?" Picard snapped, but before any one answered, Dr. Crusher's voice filled the bridge.

"Medical emergency in sickbay. Get someone down here at once."

Picard surveyed his bridge crew. "Mr. O'Brien, report to sickbay. Counselor Troi, what is the matter?"

"I feel hot," she whispered. "Too hot." Her pupils were dilated and she looked flushed.

"Snap out of it, Counselor," ordered Picard who had seen the Betazoid empathically locked to a subject before. He was relieved when he saw her pulling herself together.

"It is Commander Riker I felt." She spoke more clearly now. "Permission to leave the bridge, Captain."

"Not granted," Picard said. He watched Troi carefully. She would not be of any help to Riker in this state.

"Captain, Lieutenant Worf is also in the auxiliary sickbay," Data said.

Picard's eyebrows rose. "Take over here, Mr. Data. When Counselor Troi is composed, ask her to attempt to contact the entity again." Picard marched from the bridge.

O'Brien came into the sickbay at a dead run and skidded to a halt. Dr. Crusher was bending over Worf, who looked as though he had had an accident with a meat grinder.

"Look after Riker," she ordered. "I have my hands full already." O'Brien's gaze shifted along to where his friend lay sprawled on another diagnostic bed. Riker at least was not bleeding anywhere.

O'Brien moved over hastily and looked at the diagnostic screen. The life signs were erratic, but not approaching a critical level. Riker groaned, opened his eyes, and vomited over O'Brien.

"Sorry," Riker muttered. "Worf?" he enquired.

O'Brien sighed, "What are you coming to, William Riker?" He crossed his fingers behind his back. "Worf is fine. The doctor's seeing to him. What have you been doing to yourself?"

"Charging to the rescue," gasped Riker and lay still on the bed.

O'Brien did his best to sort out the Commander, but he did not feel qualified to use any drugs. "Hold on there, Will," he said, as he saw Riker flinching. O'Brien glanced up at the Doctor. She was still engaged with Worf, but as he watched she straightened up and sighed with relief.

"He's going to be fine." She adjusted the controls of the

equipment around Worf, and wiped her face with her hand. "Now for you, Mr. Riker." Dr. Crusher strode over to Riker and signalled to O'Brien that he could retire. O'Brien retreated a few paces, but did not leave.

"Report please, Dr. Crusher," Picard panted as he hurried in past O'Brien.

"Lieutenant Worf has been mauled by some animal. He will be fine, Jean-Luc," she added, noting the Captain's expression. Riker struggled to sit up, but she pushed him down firmly. "Mr. Riker saved the Lieutenant's life. I'm glad I found time to teach him Klingon first aid." She paused. "Riker is still suffering from the effects of the Net. Plus he has been doping himself with my drugs, but he too will be fine once we leave the Net. In the meantime I am keeping him here."

"I need a report from Worf," Picard said.

"Out of the question," Beverly Crusher responded.

"From Riker then." He noted that the Doctor still did not look happy, but she voiced no complaint. Picard approached his First Officer. "Feel like telling me what's been going on, Number One?"

Riker again struggled to sit up, but Dr. Crusher told him to be still. "There was a strange light," he began. "The doctor collapsed on top of me. I tried to examine her, but nothing seemed wrong. I called the bridge, but no-one answered. When I got there you were all in some kind of trance. Worf was not there. Worf?" Riker looked up at the doctor.

"He'll be fine, Will. Carry on."

"Worf wasn't there. The computer said he'd gone. I sent a pod out. Then Worf reappeared." Riker grimaced, and Dr. Crusher exchanged a loaded glance with Picard. "I got him to sickbay and started to treat him. Then Dr. Crusher woke."

"That's fine, Number One. You've done a good job," Picard said. The doctor was signalling to him. Riker's eyes were closed, but he did not look relaxed. "Dr. Crusher will be back in a minute," Picard said and followed after the doctor.

"Well, Doctor?" Picard asked.

"I'm not happy with Riker's progress." She hesitated. "At the moment his condition is tolerable, but it is deteriorating, and it is out of my control. Worf is currently much sicker, but I feel confident of his recovery in time. With Riker, the neurological activity is continuing, and I do not want to give him any further medication. The stimulants didn't help either." She paused again. "Get us out of this place soon, Jean-Luc, or I cannot guarantee the consequences."

Picard nodded. It was at moments like this that he came closest to questioning the Federation, and himself, for demanding so much in the name of duty. He returned to sickbay and saw O'Brien in the corner. A second glance revealed the state of O'Brien's uniform, but from the expression on his face it appeared that O'Brien was ignorant of Riker's prognosis.

"Get cleaned up, Mr. O'Brien, and return to the bridge."

O'Brien coloured, and followed Picard out of the room.

Data vacated the Captain's chair as soon as Picard entered the bridge. The Captain sat down. "Counselor?" he asked.

"I cannot contact it," Troi said. "Bill? How is Commander Riker, Captain?"

"Worf and Riker are safe in the doctor's capable hands," Picard said. He spotted the flush of shame mixed with relief on Troi's face, and wished he did not feel so guilty, but he felt that the morale of the crew was far too low for the unadulterated truth. "Impulse speed towards the planet, Mr. La Forge," Picard commanded.

The engines strained to life. "We're not moving, sir," La Forge said.

"Engines off," Picard said. "Data, launch another report to the Enterprise. Counselor, please try to contact the entity again."

"Do you have a theory, Captain?" inquired Data.

"I am hoping that our attempt to proceed will stir that - thing - back into action," Picard said.

"It is there again, sir, growing stronger. It is challenging us again," Troi said.

Geordi clapped. "Good guess, Captain."

Picard winced, "We have a long way to go yet, Mr. La Forge... Counselor, instruct it that we are deliberating, and then join me with Dr. Crusher. The bridge is yours, Mr. Data," and he marched out again.

Dr. Crusher followed Picard out of sickbay. "Nothing has changed here, Jean-Luc."

"Doctor, can you identify or reproduce whatever it is that kept Riker awake, or affected the rest of us?"

"No. Yes. It must be the neurological effect of the Net on Riker that accounts for the difference, but I cannot isolate it, duplicate it or explain it."

"Then perhaps you'd prefer to get Riker back on his feet again," Picard exploded.

"Jean-Luc, is this a joke?"

Picard retracted his outburst immediately. "I apologise, Beverly. I just ran out of options, but that is no excuse for taking it out on you."

Troi entered quietly. Picard observed that she was unsettled again. "The entity is waiting, Captain." The Counselor looked at them both. "You are hiding something, both of you."

"I'm sorry, Deanna. Riker is not improving, but I have little choice..." Picard swung round to face Dr. Crusher again. "Do the best you can Doctor. Mr. Riker is going to have to be our second candidate."

The atmosphere on the battle bridge felt almost as grim as that in the sickbay, Picard thought as he swapped places with Data. He had left the Counselor with the doctor in sickbay. Quietly he informed La Forge, Data and O'Brien that Riker had volunteered for the second challenge. Picard scowled as he recalled Riker's attempt at humour when he accepted.

"Picard to sickbay. Are you ready?"

"In a manner of speaking." It was Dr. Crusher's voice.

"Counselor, tell them our selection. Good luck, Number One."

"Thank you, sir." Riker's voice sounded wobbly. "If I can't fight it, I'll be sick on it, sir."

"It has accepted." Troi's voice this time. Picard tensed unconsciously.

"It's coming again!" La Forge gestured at the screen.

Picard picked out the familiar pattern, and watched as it approached. As the light flared through the ship, he felt the same calm sweeping through him, and remote from all worries he closed his eyes and settled into his chair.

Riker was standing in Sickbay one instant, and in the middle of Nowhere the next. He noted that his phaser was missing. It was pitch black; wind whistled around him, and his head throbbed incessantly. He swivelled on the balls of his feet. The manoeuvre took him longer than normal. To the left he heard a faint sound. He turned to face it. The skies of Nowhere flashed with lightening, and Riker caught a glimpse of an enormous cat-like animal, perhaps fifty metres away. Riker's legs were threatening to buckle underneath him. He was not even sure that the creature was the enemy, but he wished he felt capable of running. In the dark he had a few seconds to consider. Then the cat turned silently towards him, and he stared straight into a pair of luminous purple eyes.

There was something about the eyes, something he should remember. Riker dredged out the memory with difficulty. Calm down, he told himself, relax. Forcing everything else to the background, Riker tried to concentrate on feelings of friendship, and opened his mind to the creature. Silently the great beast padded towards him, eyes glowing. A paw landed on his chest and pushed him to the ground. Hurriedly Riker suppressed his panic, and focussed on radiating goodwill. Warm musky breath tickled his face, and Riker submitted helplessly as the cat licked him from end to end.

As abruptly as he had arrived, Riker found himself back in the sickbay. He was lying on the floor, still dripping with saliva. Dr. Crusher and Troi were tangled up in one another off to one

side. He pushed himself up. "Computer, report."

"All systems functioning normally," it assured him.

But not mine, Riker thought sourly. He made it over to Worf. The Klingon's condition appeared stable, but Riker was unable to stand up any longer. He sat on the floor. "Computer, record this message and relay it to Captain Picard." Riker struggled to hold it together; the walls of the sickbay were swaying around him. "I appeared somewhere - windy and dark. A huge zurmot was there. I made friends. End - " Riker watched the walls close over him and collapsed.

Picard drifted back to normality with an increasing sense of urgency. By the time he had received Riker's cryptic message and verified the ship's status, Dr. Crusher was reporting.

"Both of your officers appear to be recovering. The pattern of the neurological activity in Riker's brain has altered slightly, and is no longer promoting his symptoms."

Picard felt the mood in the bridge bumping upwards almost as a physical thing. "When will Riker be capable of making a report?"

"I should prefer to let him come round in his own time."

"Understood. Call me if there is any change, Doctor. Impulse speed to the planet, Mr. La Forge."

"We're moving!" La Forge said. "Shall I engage the warp drive?"

"Make it so."

It took them eight hours to clear the net. Dr. Crusher spent the time worrying about their patients. Troi worried about why the Doctor was worried. La Forge worried about the engines. Data worried why he could not find any references to zurmots. O'Brien worried whether the transporters needed a fourth checking over. Riker and Worf did not worry about much at all. Picard simply worried about everything. Fortunately for the Captain's nerves they emerged from the Net very close to Silia 4H.

"I am receiving a transmission from the planet," Data said. "It is a recorded message giving the nature and locations of the finds to date."

"To date?" Picard queried.

"It would appear that they are still investigating areas of interest."

"Try to contact them. Mr. O'Brien, analyse that message."

By the time they were in orbit round the planet, Data had set up a visual link to the scientists.

"This is Captain Picard of the USS Enterprise," Picard said.

"How may we help you?"

Picard felt redundant. The transfer operation was well underway, with O'Brien supervising it and the archaeologists on the planet still searching away. Meanwhile Data and Dr. Crusher were engrossed in discussions with Professor Howe and the two Vulcan biologists. Picard had been out of his depth in less than ten minutes. He was concerned about the return trip through the Net, but until the others reached some conclusions there was very little he could do.

The Captain made his way to the transporter room. He waited quietly at the door awhile, watching O'Brien. O'Brien was whistling away, but it had not impaired his efficiency. Strange objects appeared on the platform only to disappear again almost immediately, as O'Brien sent them on to the appropriate holding area within the Enterprise. The procedure was complex, but O'Brien was making record time.

"Can I help?"

O'Brien jumped. He wished the Captain would not do that, sneaking up on people unannounced. "No, sir, I should catch up with the archaeologists in a few hours, and then there will only be last minute finds."

"Good work, Mr. O'Brien." Picard went to check on La Forge in the battle bridge, but there were no problems there either. He felt acutely lonely. The immediate urgency had passed and the ship felt deserted. Picard found himself wandering close to the auxiliary sickbay, and headed towards it.

Troi was holding Riker's hand when the Captain entered. Unselfconsciously she released it. "He is much better, Captain."

"Thank you, Counselor. You look exhausted. I'll take over for a while." Picard took Troi's place, and put his hand where hers had been. Riker was still hot to the touch, but he did seem more peaceful. The Captain sat there for a long time, reflecting on the quirks that had led him to this position. Riker's presence was oddly comforting, and Picard felt himself relaxing.

"Penny for them, sir."

Picard started. "I was thinking about old friends, Number One." Picard thought a shadow crossed Riker's face. "What is it, Will?"

"I was remembering an old friend too, sir. The murzot reminded me of him."

"Murzot? What murzot?"

"The murzot in the Net." Riker was puzzled.

Picard laughed. "Murzot? You mentioned something called a zurmot in your message, but not a murzot. Data has been through all the memory banks searching after your zurmot."

Riker grinned, the corners of his eyes crinkling up. "Murzot? Zurmot? What's the difference? Do you play chess, Captain?"

"Yes. Why? Is this an invitation?"

Riker nodded. "If you would like to, sir. I had a friend whom I used to play with years ago; he kept a murzot. I stopped playing after he died."

"I'll get a chess set, Number One."

"A few weeks ago I first realized that, although governed by physical laws, the Net has been designed for its physiological effect." Professor Howe was summarising their discussion for Picard. "Our subsequent research, combined with your experiences, confirms this hypothesis. Almost certainly the Silians themselves were immune to the Net, but intruders would find themselves incapacitated by it. The challenge itself might be a test of travellers' intentions."

"The murzots," Data interrupted. "I have collected many interesting facts about them. They are predators with a limited telepathic capability. They attack anything that does not register as friendly. It appears that the creature Commander Riker met is related."

"How does this affect our chances of getting out of the Net?" Picard asked.

"I am sorry, Captain. We are not able to control these phenomena yet. I am also unable to explain your First Officer's reaction to the Net. We might never do so."

"Thank you anyway, Professor. Please prepare to leave quickly. The Net will reach us in one hour."

"We are ready now, Captain."

"Impulse speed, Mr. La Forge. Set a course for the rest of the Enterprise." Picard mentally crossed his fingers as the ship re-entered the Net.

"Maintaining speed, Captain. We are not being slowed down."

"Captain, the entity is there again." Troi reached out. "It is hard to describe, but I believe it is wishing us well."

"Our patients are doing fine." Dr. Crusher's voice added to Picard's growing optimism.

"Go to warp eight, Mr. La Forge," Picard ordered. "Take us home," and the ship accelerated away.

Four days later O'Brien was searching around the holodeck. The adapted program was almost perfect. O'Brien had noticed the mermaids with satisfaction, and now all he needed was to find Riker. He heard laughter and spun round. Riker was standing on the sand, viewing the mermaids incredulously. O'Brien pulled the trigger triumphantly.

"You win." Riker held his hands up. "Where did you get those?"

"Oh, I have friends, you know," O'Brien said modestly. "I'm in a bit of a hurry. Three of the archaeologists asked me to eat with them. I'll leave you to brush up your technique, Will. You're loosing your touch." And O'Brien made his exit.

